



By Cynthia Weiss

# Mayo Clinic Q and A: Talking to young children about anatomy and sex

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**DEAR MAYO CLINIC:** I have two children — a 3-year-old son and a newborn daughter. My son is beginning to notice his anatomy more, touching his genitals and asking questions about his sister. He is noticing that her anatomy is different from his. He also asked how she got into and out of my body. I am wondering if you have advice on how best to answer his questions and address other curiosities that might arise as a result?

**ANSWER:** Sex education often begins with children's curiosity about their bodies. Here's how to set the stage for sex education — and how to answer your children's questions.

Sex education is a topic many parents would prefer to avoid. If you have young children, you might think you're off the hook — at least for a while. But that's not necessarily true, especially since your recent pregnancy has brought questions.

Generally speaking, sex education can begin anytime, but it's best to let your children set the pace with their questions.

**Early exploration**

As children learn to walk and talk, they also begin to learn about their bodies. Open the door to sex education by teaching your children the proper names for sex organs, perhaps during bath time. You can incorporate the information into answering your son's questions about his baby sister.

If he points to a body part, simply tell him what it is. This is also a good time to talk about which parts of the body are private.

When your children ask questions about their body — or yours — don't giggle, laugh or get embarrassed. Take the questions at face value, and offer direct, age-appropriate responses. If your children want to know more, they will ask.

### Expect self-stimulation

Many toddlers express their natural sexual curiosity through self-stimulation. Boys may pull at their penises, and girls may rub their genitals. Teach your children that masturbation is a normal but private activity.

If your children start masturbating in public, try to distract them. If that fails, take your children aside for a reminder about the importance of privacy.

Sometimes frequent masturbation can indicate a problem. Perhaps children feel anxious or aren't receiving enough attention at home. It can even be a sign of sexual abuse.

Teach your children that no one is allowed to touch their private parts without permission. If you're concerned about your children's behavior, consult their health care provider.

### Curiosity about others

By age 3 or 4, children often realize that boys and girls have different genitals. As your son has noticed, his sister is different. It is valuable to offer a simple explanation, such as, "Boys' bodies and girls' bodies are made differently."

As natural curiosity kicks in, you may find your child playing doctor or examining another child's sex organs. While such exploration is far removed from adult sexual activity — and it's harmless when only young children are involved — as a family matter, you may want to set limits on such exploration.

### Everyday moments are key

Sex education isn't a single tell-all discussion. Instead, take advantage of everyday opportunities to discuss sex.

If there's a pregnancy in the family, for example, tell your children that babies grow in a special place inside the mother called the uterus. If your children want more details on how the baby got there or how the baby will be born, provide those details.






Consider these examples:

- **How do babies get inside a mommy's tummy?**  
You might say, "A mom and a dad make a baby by holding each other in a special way."
- **How are babies born?**  
For some children, it might be enough to say, "Doctors and nurses help babies who are ready to be born." If your child wants more details, you might say, "Usually a mom pushes the baby out of her vagina."

As your child matures and asks more detailed questions, you can provide more detailed responses. Answer specific questions using correct terminology.

Even if you're uncomfortable, forge ahead. Remember, you're setting the stage for open, honest discussions in the years to come. —

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