

STAGES OF CHILD SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

Just as children reach developmental milestones like crawling, walking and talking, they also reach milestones related to sexuality. Parents can better support young people in leading sexually healthy lives if they know what to expect at each age.

This scale of typical sexual development is taken from child development research. It's important to know that the stages are not always the same for everyone. For example, certain life experiences, like having an intellectual or development disability or experiencing a trauma may impact the timing of these milestones. If you have questions about your child's development, talk to a health care provider.



BIRTH - 2 YEARS OLD (INFANTS)

Children at this age may:

- Explore body parts.
- Experience genital pleasure.
- Learn expected behaviors for boys and girls.



3-4 YEARS OLD (TODDLERS)

Children at this age may:

- Become aware of and very curious about gender/body differences.
- Begin masturbating.
- Play house, play doctor, or explore other forms of sex play with friends and siblings.
- Establish a sense of their own gender.
- Copy adult sexual behaviors.
- Be curious about their origins: "Where did I come from?"

Questions that 3-4 year-olds may ask include:

- Where do babies come from?
- Will I have breasts or a penis when I grow up?
- How come you have a penis or breasts and I don't?
- Why do boys stand up to go to the bathroom?
- What is a tampon for?
- How does a baby get into or out of its mother?



5 - 8 YEARS OLD (SCHOOL AGE)

Children at this age may:

- Be very curious about pregnancy and birth.
- Have strong same-gender friendships. Children of another gender are often seen as gross or yucky.
- Begin to focus on peer group style of dress and speech.
- Discover their sexual orientation (this does not mean that the child is acting on the orientation).

Questions that 5-8 year-olds may ask include:

- How does a baby get food when it's inside its mother?
- Does having a baby hurt?
- What is sex?
- What is a condom?
- How can I find a friend?
- Why do some people have penises and some don't?
- Why do some people have breasts and some don't?

This handout was developed with information from *Teach & Talk: The Subject is Sex* by Wilson, Quackenbush & Kane; along with information from Advocates for Youth website: www.advocatesforyouth.org/storage/advfy/documents/growth-and-development-ages-18-and-over.pdf



9 - 12 YEARS OLD (PRETEENS)

Children at this age may:

- Begin puberty (including menstruation and wet dreams).
- Become more modest and desire privacy.
- Begin experiencing mood swings.
- Feel awkward and wonder “Am I normal?”
- Develop romantic crushes on friends, older teens, celebrities, or sometimes teachers or counselors. Some may even have romantic and sexual fantasies.
- May question whether they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender.
- Continue to socialize mainly with same-gender friends.
- Masturbate to orgasm.
- Be strongly influenced by peers, but parents remain the main source of values.

Questions that 9-12 year-olds may ask include:

- Will I develop breasts or grow tall like my friends?
- How does someone “have sex?”
- Why do girls have a period?
- What is a wet dream?
- What are testicles for?
- How can a baby live inside its mother?



13 - 18 YEARS OLD (TEENS)

Teens at this age may:

- Express their desire to be more independent.
- Look for ways to express their identity (i.e., clothing, behavior, etc.).
- Participate in risk taking and experimentation.
- Face decisions about sex and drugs.
- Initiate sexual activity.
- Become involved in a “serious” relationship.
- May “come out” if they are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, regardless of sexual behavior or experience.

Questions that 13-18 year-olds may ask include:

- How old were you when you started having sex?
- Did you have a lot of friends at my age?
- What is oral/anal sex?
- How do gay people have sex?
- Did you fall in love at my age?
- How did you know when you were in love?
- How will I know if I’m gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender?



19- 24 YEARS OLD (YOUNG ADULTS)

Young adults may:

- Take on adult roles and responsibilities.
- Move into adult relationships with their parents.
- Complete the process of physical maturation.
- Understand abstract concepts and be aware of consequences.
- Enter into intimate sexual and emotional relationships.

Questions that 19-24 year-olds may ask include:

- I want to make sure I am taking all the right steps to protect my health. Where do I start?
- Am I ready for a committed relationship?
- How do I talk to my partner about STIs?
- How often should I go to the doctor?
- What should I do if I’ve had unprotected sex?
- How do I balance my relationship with all my other responsibilities?