

A close-up photograph of a man with a beard and a young child reading a book together. The man is on the left, looking down at the book. The child is on the right, also looking down at the book. The man is wearing a dark grey sweater, and the child is wearing a yellow sweater with a blue and white graphic. The background is blurred.

Rutgers

For sexual and
reproductive health
and rights

**Children's relational and
sexual development**

0-6 years old

**Parenting tips for raising healthy
children**

Relational and sexual development

A child's healthy and safe development involves exploring their own bodies and learning to navigate feelings and relationships. In young children, this includes things such as friendship, discovering whether they are a boy or a girl, and being able to say what they want and what they don't want.



Baby

Cuddling is great

A baby explores the world through touch, sight, taste, and smell. Babies enjoy being touched and cuddled – it gives them a sense of security. Babies may start touching their own genitals, usually by coincidence rather than on purpose.



Toddler

I have a penis. What about you?

Toddlers become aware of their own bodies and learn whether they are a boy or a girl. They're curious about their own bodies and those of others. They also begin to discover boundaries, by, for instance, using 'naughty' words.



Pre-schooler

Where do babies come from?

As children get older, they gradually learn about appropriate behaviour at home and in school. Pre-schoolers ask lots of questions, such as how a baby gets into a mama's belly, and how it gets out. They learn by watching others and they enjoy playing games that involve exploring their bodies, such as playing house or doctor. At this age, they also form clear ideas about how boys and girls are supposed to behave.

Curious

Children are curious about how bodies work, where babies come from, and how they can show whether they like something or not. They've got lots of questions. It is very comforting for children to have you, as a parent, there to help them.



School-age child

We're friends

At this age, children can already experience the feeling of being in love. Friendships also become more significant. Boys and girls often play separately, and playing together can sometimes be exciting for them. They start comparing themselves to others or to how they wish to be, leading to moments of insecurity. They may also start feeling self-conscious about their naked bodies.



Adolescent

In love and insecure

Puberty typically begins between the ages of ten and fifteen. Adolescents undergo numerous changes in a short period. Their bodies grow and mature, and they may feel extremely uncertain about these transformations. They experience romantic feelings, experiment with kissing and touching each other, and they start to masturbate. During this phase, young people often discover their sexual preferences.



Almost an adult

Flirting and intimacy

As young people gradually approach adulthood, they start flirting, dating, and, in some cases, engaging in sexual activities. Negotiation, communication, understanding desires and boundaries, and showing respect are important themes. By the age of eighteen, half of all young people have had sexual intercourse. The other half may take things more slowly or await the right partner. Online platforms and social media play a significant role in establishing connections.

Relational and sexual development and sexual upbringing

Raising a child involves guiding them through their entire development, and sexual development is a part of this journey. This includes things such as love and friendship, discovering whether you are a boy or a girl, saying what you want and what you don't want, and feeling comfortable with yourself. This development begins at birth.

Sexual upbringing involves guiding your child through a safe and healthy sexual development. Children are naturally curious about how their bodies work, where babies come from, and how to communicate their likes and dislikes. Sex education gives your child the knowledge and skills to get through these aspects of their development.

My child wants to know how a baby gets into its mother's womb. What should I say?

You could say: 'A seed from daddy joins up with an egg from mommy. And these grow into a baby, in mommy's belly. When the baby gets big enough, it comes out through mommy's vagina.'

If your child has more questions, you can answer them in your own way. Or you can read a picture book with your child.

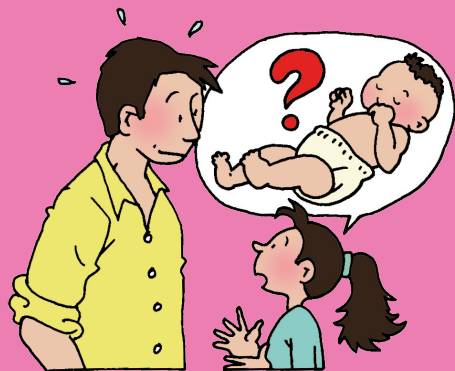
Too young?

When children are young, they feel a very strong bond with their parents or guardians. They are sensitive to everything you do and say. Even when your child is at such a young age, you are already passing on important values and norms when it comes to love and respect. You are the first person they come to when they have questions. Let them know you are there for them. Talking about things that have to do with sexual development, in a way that's appropriate for their age, shows that it is normal and will make it easier to talk about things as they get older. Plus, children at this age are very curious. You don't have to explain everything in detail. You will sense what they can understand and what is not relevant for them yet.

** By the word parents, we also mean educators and guardians of children.*

What can you do as a parent?

- **Provide safety.** Hugging your child or telling them they are special makes them feel safe, protected, and loved. When they are hugging, your child also learns what feels good to them.
- **Set rules.** By establishing rules, you teach your child what is acceptable and what isn't. For example, teaching them not to touch their penis or vulva in front of other people.
- **Pass on norms and values.** Sharing your thoughts about things and explaining why you think that way, helps your child think for him or herself. Often, this leads to your child adopting your values and norms.
- **Give them space.** Let your child explore their body and their feelings, with respect for themselves and others.
- **Respect wishes and boundaries.** By expressing your own wishes and boundaries, you teach your child that they can do the same. Additionally, take your child's wishes and boundaries seriously, such as greeting them in a way that they are comfortable with, even if it is different from what other people do.
- **Be an example.** Showing that you respect and love other people sets an example for your child. This includes how you communicate your wishes and boundaries and how you deal with other people's wishes and boundaries.
- **Be involved.** To give your child the support they need, it is important to understand what your child is going through and to understand how healthy sexual development works. Showing interest in your child's activities shows that you care, making your child more likely to approach you with questions or problems, including those related to relationships and sexuality.
- **Answer questions.** Talking with your child, in your own words, about the body, relationships, and sexuality, signals that it is okay to talk about these things. This encourages your child to come to you if they have questions.



Did you know?

Each stage of your child's life brings new developments and experiences. You can support your child by discussing these changes and taking their questions and worries seriously. This should be done in a way that's appropriate to your child's age and development. When you talk to you child openly and in a relaxed way, he or she will get the feeling that they can discuss anything with you. Plus, your role as a parent includes helping your child learn how to have relationships with others and how to make good choices. In other words, you are an example for your child. This way, your child will have enough knowledge and confidence to make conscious and safe choices, express their wishes and boundaries, and recognise and respect those in others.

What should I call it?

What word should I use for the genitals? Is it good to use a neutral word such as pee-pee?

Call genitals by their correct names, or at least teach your child the correct names: penis and vulva. This shows that for you it is a normal part of the body and that your child can come to you if he or she has questions about it. Children who know the right words are also better at indicating when they've experienced something unpleasant.

Why should you talk to your young child about these things?

1. It is part of healthy and safe development.

Every child goes through different phases of development. Of course, how you approach your child's sex education needs to match their phase of development. Answer questions and give information that's appropriate for your child's age and development, in your own words and in your own way.

2. You are their most important role model.

By talking to your child and answering their questions, you teach them that they can come to you. This gives them a safe space, ensures they receive reliable and age-appropriate information, and allows you to pass on your own values and principles. As your child grows older, you can continue to talk with them about these things.

3. You make your child more resilient.

A resilient child can stand up for themselves. They can express their own wishes and boundaries and come up with solutions in challenging situations. You also teach your child to respect the wishes and boundaries of others.



Physical contact and care

Babies discover the world with their senses and with their bodies. As a parent, you support your child by loving them and providing them security. Physical contact with your child is an important part of this.

Cuddling

Healthy and safe development starts with loving and cuddling your child. Babies and toddlers discover the world by looking, feeling and repeating things they like to do. They also do that with their bodies. Babies love physical contact. They like to be touched and cuddled. This gives them a safe feeling and creates self-confidence. It strengthens their self-esteem, it makes them feel loved. It is an important part of creating a secure attachment.

Washing

Wash your child's penis or vulva with water and a washcloth or cloth. Do not use soap. Make sure that the pleats are also clean. In a boy, the foreskin doesn't need to be retracted during the first two years. This is only possible when the foreskin comes loose from the glans. This happens when boys are between two and five years old.

Tip

After changing your child's diaper, you can rub him or her with some oil. This gives them the feeling that changing a dirty diaper can also be pleasant.

Erect penis

Babies sometimes get an erect penis. That is perfectly normal and has nothing to do with being aroused. It is a physical reaction that happens on its own or in reaction to an inadvertent touch. If it happens while you are changing the diaper, just continue as if nothing happened. But it can be handy to fold the penis down into the diaper before closing it, otherwise your baby may pee up and out of the diaper.

Did you know?

A child who's cuddled a lot will later think more positively about themselves and their body than a child who's hardly ever held in a loving way. Touching and cuddling make your child feel safe and appreciated.

On your lap

Toddlers like to sit on people's laps. Whether it is to read a book together, get a hug, or just to be with someone, toddlers enjoy sitting on laps. Some children may like it more than others. Some children prefer roughhousing rather than sitting quietly on a lap. Playing like this with your child is also a way to show that you care about them.



Discover and explore

Babies and toddlers discover their own bodies by looking and feeling. They are curious about their bodies and those of others.

Touching their own genitals

By the end of the first year, children sometimes touch their own genitals intentionally (earlier this might happen by chance). Touching one's own genitals is part of a child's development and getting to know their bodies. They discover that touching their own genitals gives a different feeling than, for example, touching their arm. Some children touch their own genitals frequently because it gives them a good feeling.

My child touches his or her own genitals. Should I be worried?

A child touching their own genitals at this age can make caregivers feel uncomfortable. They may wonder whether it should be allowed or not. Rest assured, there's nothing unusual about it. It is very common and is actually part of a child's development and the exploration of their own bodies. Touching their own genitals can provide a pleasant feeling. However, it is important to realise that this pleasant feeling isn't the same as sexual arousal experienced by adolescents or adults. Young children don't have those kinds of feelings.

There's no need to prohibit this behaviour. In fact, prohibiting it might make your child feel that it is not okay to explore their own body. You don't even need to discourage it. Instead, you can explain that it is not appropriate to touch themselves in certain contexts, such as when other people are around. Tell them this is something to do in private, for instance, when they are alone in their room. Some parents may worry that by allowing this, they are encouraging their child to touch their own genitals. That's not the case. Instead, you are teaching your child about privacy and giving them clear boundaries about when something is appropriate, and when it is not.

Curious

Toddlers and pre-schoolers are often very curious about their own bodies and those of others. For example, they want to know how you can tell if someone is a boy or a girl, so they want to learn what the differences are between a boy's and a girl's genitals. The bathroom is a place they can do that. It is important to keep in mind that this behaviour in children is not at all sexual. This is normal for children at this age – it is all part of getting to know your own body. Of course, you can set some rules. It is important to explain that you should never do anything against someone else's will and that your child should treat their own body and other people's bodies with respect. We will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter. If you do find this behaviour inappropriate, you can also look at a picture book with your child and in that way help them learn the differences between boys and girls.

My son attends day-care. The teacher told me he likes to go to the bathroom with other children, especially with girls. I'm not sure what to make of that.



Rules, what is okay, and what is not okay

From the age of four, children learn at home and at school how they 'should' behave. They know better and better what is and isn't allowed. At this age, for example, they learn that they shouldn't walk around naked or touch their own penis or vulva in front of other people and they learn to respect other people's wishes and boundaries.

Playing doctor

Young children like to play games such as 'doctor' or 'mom and dad'. While playing these games, they learn about their own and other people's bodies and discover the differences between boys and girls. That is part of their development. However, when a child starts going to primary school, you will notice a change. The curiosity is still there, but children also start learning rules. For example, they learn that you are not supposed to touch your penis or vulva when other people are around, or that you're not supposed to walk around naked when you have visitors. Because they are learning all kinds of rules and social expectations, children at this age increasingly play these games out of sight of adults.

My child likes to play doctor with a friend. Should I be worried?

Agree on some rules

It is normal for children to play doctor. You don't have to forbid it, but it is good to set some ground rules.

For example:

- Never do something you don't want to do.
- You are in charge of your own body.
- Only do things you both like to do.
- No one is the boss over anyone else.
- Never hurt anyone.
- Don't put anything in holes (mouth, ear, nose, vagina, poop hole).

Rules for physical play and behaviour

It is important to teach children what behaviour is okay and what isn't okay. This helps to prevent unwanted behaviour, including unwanted sexual behaviour. The Flag System helps to assess behaviour based on six criteria. By applying these criteria to a situation, you as a parent or guardian can judge whether the behaviour is 'okay' or not. If the behaviour is okay, you don't need to do anything. You can talk about it, or ignore it. If the behaviour is not okay or if it is inappropriate, then the behaviour has crossed the line and you need to modify the behaviour or intervene and possibly seek help. These are the Flag System's six criteria:

1. **Mutual consent:** Does the child want it, does the other child want it as well, do both children like the behaviour?
2. **Voluntary engagement:** Did the child choose to do it themselves? Do they dare to say no? Are they able to say no?
3. **Equality:** Are the children equally strong, the same age and equally smart? Or is there a power difference between the children?
4. **Level of development:** Your child should never do anything that he or she is too young or too old for. Does the behaviour suit your child's developmental age?
5. **Context:** Is your child's behaviour appropriate? It is not bothering or shocking other people nearby, is it?
6. **Impact:** Does your child know the consequences of his or her behaviour? They aren't taking risks that could have harmful consequences, are they?

For further information, go to the guide for parents '[Crossing the line](#)' (in Dutch).



Sometimes, games or behaviours may go too far. When do you intervene?

- When a child does something they don't want to do, doesn't dare to do, or is forced to do.
- When the children playing are not equals. For example, when a child is playing doctor with another child who is three years older or younger.
- When the game or behaviour doesn't match the child's developmental age.
- When the game or behaviour takes place somewhere it is not appropriate.
- When one child hurts another child or if the behaviour could have harmful consequences for the child.

Dirty-word phase

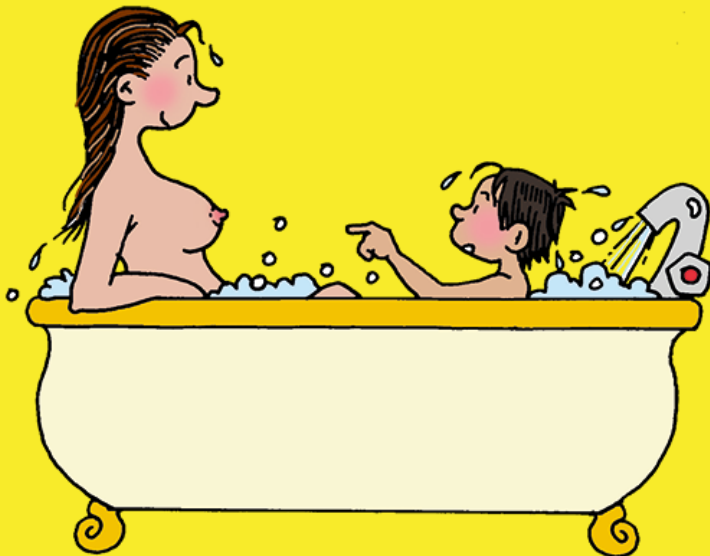
Children can enter a dirty-word phase from around the age of three. They think it is fun and exciting to say 'poop' or 'penis' or other 'dirty' words. They do this because they see that certain words get a reaction from adults. That's why they may say these words over and over again. You can ignore this behaviour, or pay as little attention as possible. Or, if you prefer, you can agree with your child that they can say as many dirty words as they want for five minutes every day. Other options are to explain what the words mean, or to simply laugh when your child says them. Most likely, the fun will wear off quickly and the behaviour will stop on its own.



My child points to my breasts or genitals and asks what they are. How should I respond?

Children are naturally curious about other people's bodies. What is a boy, what is a girl? What is daddy? What is mommy? And how can you tell?

- Make use of their curiosity.
- Answer their questions honestly.
- Explain things in a way that's appropriate for their age.
- Answer in your own words.
- If your child asks you at a bad time, you can always come back to it later.



Girls and boys

From around the age of two or three, children realise that they're a boy or a girl. By the time they are five or six, they develop clear ideas about what a girl and a boy are 'supposed' to do.

Dolls and cars

Boys at this age often behave according to what they think boys are 'supposed' to do: they play with cars and play physical, sometimes rough, games. Girls can act very 'girly': they dress up as princesses and play with dolls.

Children like to copy each other and often imitate each other's behaviour, play, and clothing.

Some children do the opposite: there are girls who enjoy roughhousing and love soccer, and there are boys who prefer to quietly read or draw. Children don't have to conform to 'boys' or 'girls' roles. Let your child do what she or he enjoys doing. This is one way they learn about themselves.

My four-year-old son wants to wear a pink dress, like the girls in his class. What should I do?

Some differences between boys and girls may not make sense to a child, such as what clothes to wear. If, for example, your son wants to wear a dress, you can allow him to do so. If you have difficulty with this, perhaps because you are worried about bullying at school, you can always discuss it with the teacher. This way, the teacher can pay extra attention to how other children react.

Occasionally, a child may feel different from the gender assigned at birth. With some children, these feelings may disappear over time. If you would like to read more about this, [transvisie.nl](https://www.transvisie.nl) (in Dutch).

What can you do as a parent?

- Be aware of your own stereotypes.
- Give girls the opportunity to go on adventures and boys the space to express their emotions.
- Don't call things 'boys' or 'girls' things.
- Don't always divide children into two groups, the boys and the girls.
- Give girls a compliment when they've done something physically demanding and the same for boys when they've been caring.
- Set a good example: for instance, share household tasks and caregiving with your partner.



Friendship and being in love

From the age of four, children begin to form their first friendships. Preschoolers can also say that they are in love, which simply means that they like someone a lot. Sometimes a child will say they are in love with one of their friends, the teacher, or one of their parents.

Friendships

When children are four, they start to relate better to other children, leading to the first friendships. These friendships often don't last long and can be superficial. Many preschoolers play with both boys and girls, not caring about the other children's gender. Around the age of six, this changes, and boys and girls often think the other is annoying. That's because they now find it difficult to understand children of the other sex.

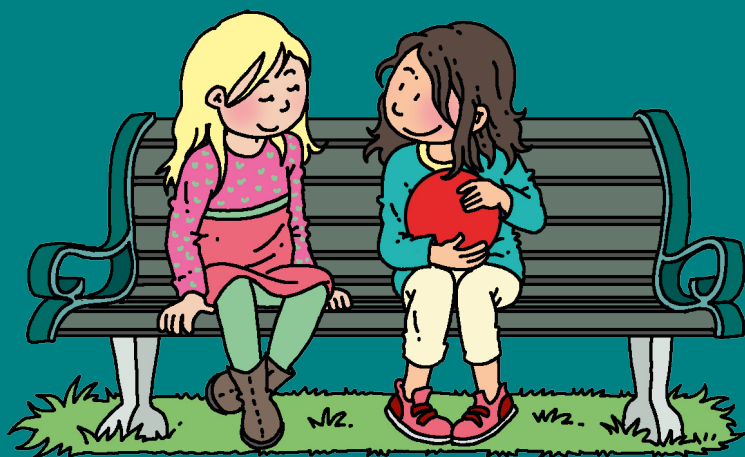
In love

When a child of this age says they are in love, it usually means they really like someone. As they grow older, children start to realise the distinction between liking someone and being in love with them. You can ask your child what being in love means to them. This shows that you take your child's feelings seriously.

You can also explain to children of this age that you can't choose who you fall in love with; it just happens. Some people fall in love with someone of the opposite gender, some people fall in love with someone of the same gender, or both.

I'm in love

When a four-year-old says, "I'm in love," they mean they have a special friendship with another child or adult. The child can be "in love" with someone of the opposite gender, the same gender, or even with their own father or mother or the teacher.



Resilience

One of the most important things you can teach your child is to express their own wishes and boundaries while at the same time respecting those of others. This makes a child more resilient.

Being resilient

Being resilient means that your child can stand up for themselves and can come up with a solution in a difficult situation, such as when another child wants something your child does not want. Teaching your child to express their own wishes and boundaries is just as important as teaching them to recognise and respect the wishes and boundaries of others.

Setting boundaries

Teach your child that they are allowed to set boundaries, and respect these boundaries yourself. For example, if your child doesn't want to give you, or their grandparents, a kiss or a hug, respect that. In this way, you teach your child that setting boundaries is acceptable and that they will be listened to. You can agree that they will say goodbye in a different way, such as with a high five. You can be an example yourself by clearly expressing your own boundaries and indicating what you like or don't like.

Are you worried?

If your child is behaving in a way that you find inappropriate for their sexual development, or if you notice sexually inappropriate behaviour, or if you have any questions about your child's development, then visit a Youth and Family Centre (Centrum voor Jeugd en Gezin) near you. You can also discuss these things at the child health clinic (consultatiebureau) or with the school doctor or nurse.

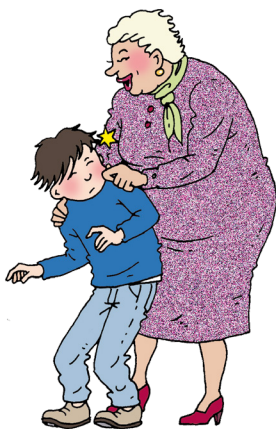
For more information, go to: opvoeden.nl/cjg (in Dutch).

How do you make your child resilient?

- Teach your child to trust their feelings. Distinguish between a 'yes-feeling', 'no-feeling', and 'not nice-feeling'. A 'yes-feeling' is something you want, a 'no-feeling' is something you don't want, and a 'not nice-feeling' is when you sense that something is wrong or doesn't feel good.
- Teach your child to express their own wishes and boundaries, and as a parent, respect them.
- Communicate your own wishes and boundaries. In this way, you set an example for your child.
- Explain that there are good and not-so-good secrets. Good secrets can be kept to oneself, but not-so-good secrets, especially those that make your child uncomfortable, should be shared with someone they trust.
- Inform your child that they should never go anywhere with other people without letting you know, even if it is someone they recognise, or if the person seems very nice.
- Emphasise that nobody can touch your child's body if they don't want them to. They are in charge of their own bodies.
- Make it clear that adults should never engage in any sexual activity with children. It is forbidden.
- Assure your child that if anything unpleasant happens, it is never their fault, and they can always talk to you about it. Let them know they can always come to you.

Tip

Read the folder 'Over de grens? (in Dutch). This folder describes what sexual behaviour with children is okay, and what behaviour isn't so good or is completely unacceptable.



To wrap it up

Sexual upbringing is the responsibility of both parents and schools

Parents, as the primary caregivers, bear the greatest responsibility in raising children, including things having to do with relationships and sexuality. You give your child love, respect, and core values, and you are the person they come to with questions. Additionally, you are an important example for your child.

Schools also play a major role in an imparting knowledge and skills. It is important that schools keep parents informed so that you, as a parent, can take into account what is being discussed at school. This gives you the chance to talk to your child in advance and tell them your own information, norms and values.

As with other subjects, schools decide how they go about teaching about relationships and sexuality and they choose their own teaching materials. If you have questions, ask someone at the school about it. Many schools tell parents about comprehensive sexuality education in their school plan or newsletters and many also organise parent evenings.

When you talk to children about sex, it doesn't mean they will start having sex earlier

Children who are well informed are usually less curious about sex. And when they start having sex, they do so at a later age, they are more likely to practice safe sex (using the pill and a condom) and they are more resilient (they experience less inappropriate sexual behaviour).

Even young children are interested in love and relationships

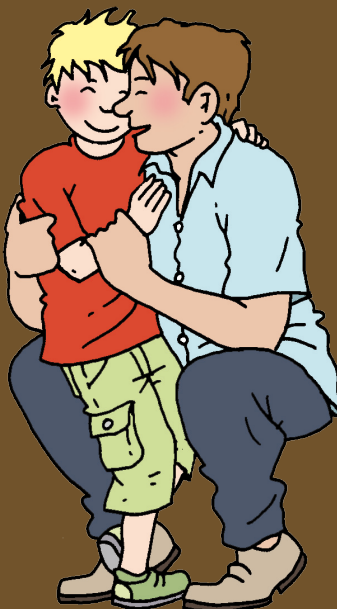
Babies and toddlers explore their bodies, pre-schoolers can be in love, and eight-year-olds may already have girlfriends or boyfriends. However, younger children approach love and relationships differently than older children and certainly differently than adults. Children often aren't familiar with the sexual meaning that adults attach to certain words or behaviours. They are in the process of discovery and they learn from others how people react. It is important as a parent or guardian to guide your child in a positive way. There is never one right way to bring up a child. This brochure is meant to provide you with some basic information on how to do this so that you can approach it in your own way.

Relational and sexual upbringing helps your child:

- Have a positive image of themselves and their body.
- Have more self-confidence and be better at standing up for him- or herself.
- Express wishes and boundaries and recognise and respect them in others.
- Later life, to have the ability to have pleasant, safe and equal (sexual) relationships.
- To be less easily influenced by what they hear or see from friends or online.
- To be more resilient when faced with unacceptable (sexual) behaviour.
- When they do become sexually active, to protect themselves better against STIs and unplanned pregnancy.

For more, go to seksueleopvoeding.info.

Questions? Or would you like to respond to this brochure? Please contact us at contact@seksueleopvoeding.info.





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More information

You can download for free more brochures about sexual education from the Rutgers' website (<http://shop.rutgers.nl>). For example:

- Sexual Education for children with disabilities 0-18
- Sexual Education for children 0-18
- Sexual Education for children 6-9
- Sexual Education for children 9-15

Websites for parents/guardians

- seksueleopvoeding.info (in Dutch)
- ouders.nl (in Dutch)

Books for children and young people

- Maar HOE dan?! (Philippine van der Goes en Dr. Karin Middelburg) (in Dutch)
- Ik vind je lief (Sanderijn van der Doef) (in Dutch)
- Saar en Jop praten over seksualiteit (Arjet Borger) (in Dutch)
- Alles over jouw lichaam (Pauline Oud) (in Dutch)
- Waar komen baby's vandaan (Pauline Oud) (in Dutch)
- Mijn familie, jouw familie (Pauline Oud) (in Dutch)
- Ja en nee gevoelens (Pauline Oud) (in Dutch)