

The Rutgers logo is a white speech bubble with a black border, containing the word "Rutgers" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The background of the entire page is a photograph of a young girl with braided hair, wearing an orange shirt, sitting between two women. The woman on the left is wearing a purple sweater and looking towards the girl. The woman on the right is wearing a pink sweater and looking towards the girl. They are all sitting on a patterned blanket.

For sexual and
reproductive health
and rights

**Children's relational and
sexual development**

0-18 years old

**Parenting tips for raising healthy
children**

Children's sexual upbringing 0-18 years

This brochure describes children's relational and sexual development from when they are new-born babies to eighteen-year-old teenagers and gives tips on how you, as a parent, can support your child.

What is relational and sexual development?

A child's healthy and safe development involves their bodies, relationships, and sexuality. You might think it is strange to discuss relational and sexual development with children, particularly when they are very young. It is important to realise that this involves learning about love and friendship, discovering whether you're a boy or a girl, being able to say what you want and what you don't want, and feeling comfortable with oneself. This development begins as soon as a baby is born.

What is sexual upbringing?

Children are curious about how the body works, where babies come from, and how to talk about what they like or don't like. Relational and sexual upbringing helps give your child the knowledge and skills to be able do these things. As your child grows up, their body changes, and they experience new emotions. They experience love and sexuality in the broader sense for the first time. Your child may feel uncertain or have questions about these things, and it is comforting for them to have you, as a parent, there for support.

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

"What should I say if my child asks where babies come from?"

"My 16-year-old daughter sends sexy pictures to her boyfriend. What should I do?"

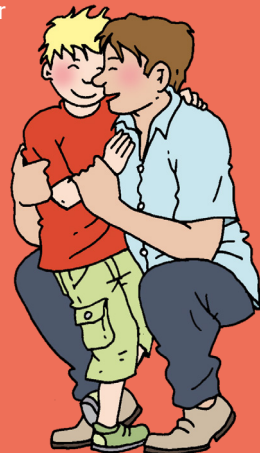
Why are you, as a parent, important?

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. Approach this in a way that is appropriate to your child's age and development. When you talk to you child openly and in a relaxed way, they will have 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're an example for your child. This way, your child will have enough knowledge and confidence to make conscious and safe choices, express their desires and boundaries, and recognise and respect those in others.

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

Your role as a parent

- **Providing safety.** Hugging your child or telling them that they are important creates a sense of safety, protection, and love.
- **Setting rules.** By establishing rules, you teach your child what's acceptable and what isn't. For example, teaching them not to touch their genitals in front of other people.
- **Passing on norms and values.** Sharing your thoughts about things and explaining why you think that way, helps your child think for themselves. Often, this leads to your child adopting your values and norms.
- **Giving space.** Let your child explore their body and their feelings, with respect for themselves and others.
- **Respecting wishes and boundaries.** By expressing your own desires 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.
- **Being 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.
- **Being 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 relational and 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.
- **Providing information and answering questions.** Engaging your child in conversation, 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. It also helps you to prepare your child for upcoming changes, such as puberty with all its challenges.

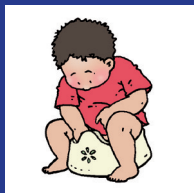


0 – 4 years old: Discovery



Physical contact

Babies enjoy physical contact. They like to be touched and cuddled, it gives them a sense of security. It boosts their self-esteem, it makes them feel loved and it is important for secure attachment. Giving them lots of affection builds their self-confidence.



Exploring their own body

Babies and toddlers explore their own bodies by observing and touching. They may touch their own genital area. Some boys may experience an erection (a stiff penis), which is a physical reaction and is not related to excitement or sex. Touching their own genital area can give a child a pleasant feeling. As a parent, you can guide your child. For example, by helping them understand the appropriate context for such actions.



Curious about bodies

Toddlers are very curious about their own bodies and those of others. For example, they might want to know where their pee comes from and how to tell if someone is a boy or a girl. They have lots of questions. You may want to prepare yourself for this curiosity by considering in advance what information you want to share with your child.



Use of 'dirty' words

Some children find it amusing to say 'dirty' words. They might say words like 'poop' or 'penis' over and over again. They have fun doing this because of the reaction these words get from adults. You can choose to ignore it, create space for it, or even laugh about it, as that may help the behaviour go away on its own.

Hand down her pants

My 3-year-old daughter often touches her vulva or rubs herself back and forth against the chair. How can I break this habit?

There's no need to stop her, this is normal behaviour. Touching their own genitals is part of a child's getting to know their body and it can give them a pleasant feeling. This isn't the same as the sexual feelings experienced by adolescents or adults. If it matches your own values, you can tell your daughter that she can do this when she's alone.

Washing

How do I wash my 2-year-old son's penis? Should I pull back his foreskin?

You can wash the penis with water and a washcloth or cloth. Don't use soap. Make sure that you also wash between the folds in his skin. At this age, the foreskin doesn't need to be pulled back. That's only possible when the foreskin separates from the glans, between the ages of three and six.

4 – 6 years old: Learning and playing



Learning rules

As children grow older, they get better at learning how they are 'supposed' to behave, what is allowed and what is not. At this age, they learn not to walk around naked or touch their penis or vulva when other people are around. As a parent, feel free to add your own rules to how your child should behave.



Playing doctor

Young children enjoy playing 'doctor' or 'mom and dad.' By playing these games, they learn about other people's bodies and discover the differences between boys and girls. Sometimes, while playing these games, they may examine each other's genital areas. As a parent, you can make sure that children respect their own bodies and the bodies of others.



Where do babies come from?

Children are by nature curious and ask lots of questions. They may ask about how a baby gets inside a woman's belly and how the baby comes out. By preparing for these questions, you can answer in your own words, in a way that suits you and your child.



Boys and girls stuff

Children start behaving more like how they think boys and girls are 'supposed' to behave, or they copy behaviour they see in others. Children who don't conform to these expectations may be seen as strange. Sometimes, a child may feel different from the gender they were assigned at birth. For some children, these feelings may fade over time.

Giving an answer

Rules for playing doctor

My 5-year-old son often plays 'doctor' with a friend. Should I be okay with that?

My 4-year-old daughter wants to know where babies come from. What should I tell her?

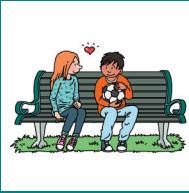
You can say something like this: "A seed from a dad joins up with an egg from a mom, and these grown into a baby inside the mom's belly. When the baby's big enough, it comes out through the mom's vagina." If your child has more questions, you can answer them in your own way. You can also read a picture book together.

Playing doctor isn't bad, it is totally normal. Discovering your own body and that of others is part of a young child's development. However, it is good to agree on some general rules with your child. For instance:

- Don't play if you don't want to, and don't do anything you don't want to do. You're in charge of your own body.
- Don't do anything someone else doesn't want.
- Don't put anything in openings (mouth, ear, nose, vagina or poop-hole).
- Don't hurt anyone.



6 – 9 years old: It is starting to get exciting



Being in love

Children at this age may say they know what it feels to be in love. Many children have experienced being in love themselves. This often means that they like someone a lot. The difference between friendship, being in love, and loving someone is starting to get clearer. As a parent, you can discuss these emotions with your child and share your perspective.



Curiosity

At this age, children are still curious about each other's bodies. This may lead to them look at or touch each other's genitals. However, this isn't done in a sexual way (like it is with teenagers or adults). Because children have learned rules about this, they often no longer do so in the sight of adults. You can help your child by teaching them to set their own boundaries and respect those of others.



Friendships

At this age, children prefer to play with children of the same sex. They start behaving more like they think children of their own sex should behave. As a parent, you can let your child know that they are free to be themselves and free to act how they want.



Comparing with others

Children become more and more aware of other people's opinions. They compare themselves with others or with how they would like to be. Girls often want to be thinner, and boys often want to be bigger. This may lead to feelings of insecurity or dissatisfaction. As a parent, you can let them know that everybody is beautiful and unique.

Gay?

My 6-year-old son says he's going to marry his best friend when he grows up. Does that mean he's gay?

When a child at this age says he wants to marry someone of his own sex when he grows up, it doesn't necessarily mean he's homosexual. At this age, such a comment usually means that he likes his friend a lot. Tomorrow, he could say he wants to marry you, or the teacher. Let him know that he can indeed fall in love with someone of his own sex and marry him if he wants to.

Boy things and girl things

My 8-year-old daughter mostly plays with boys and with boys' toys and never wants to wear a dress. Is that normal?

Many children at this age start to behave the way they think a boy or a girl 'should' behave (gender stereotyping), which is fine, but of course, it is not necessary. Children do not have to fit into a 'boy' or 'girl' role. Just let your child be themselves and do the things they like.

9 – 12 years old: Almost an adolescent



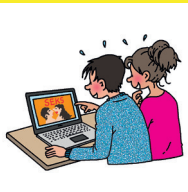
Shame

Children may start feeling embarrassed about being naked. They may prefer not to shower or change when others are around. This may depend on who the other people are. Some children may have no problem undressing at home but feel uncomfortable during P.E. class. As a parent, you can reassure your child that everybody is different, and every teenager feels insecure about their body sometimes.



First date

Some children may now start 'dating,' usually with someone from their class. Often, they do no more than hang out together during breaks or do things with a group of friends. At this age, they hardly even touch each other, and they are hardly ever alone together. As a parent, you can ask your child about these things, such as whether there are kids in the class who are in love or dating.



Curious about sex

Around the age of ten, some children become more curious about sex, while others think it is uncomfortable or disgusting. Children may start asking more questions about sex, while others may prefer not to talk about it or feel embarrassed. Planning in advance about what you want to say and how you want to say it can be helpful in these conversations.



Changing body

Puberty is coming, often a bit earlier for girls than boys. Physical changes and swings in feelings and emotions can make children feel insecure. They may wonder if their body is attractive or even normal. As a parent, you can reassure your child that everybody is different and that every body is normal.

Preparing for puberty

Should we prepare our 9-year-old son and daughter for puberty?

When your children reach this age, you can tell them that their bodies are going to start changing gradually. This way, they won't be as surprised when pubic and armpit hair start growing, or when breasts and labia start to appear, or when they have their first ejaculation or their first menstruation. You can also explain that their feelings may start to change during puberty. If you have difficulty talking about these things, there are good booklets available that children can read themselves. Or you can refer your child to a site suitable for children, such as pubergids.nl (10+), sense.info (13+) and seggsy.nl (16+).

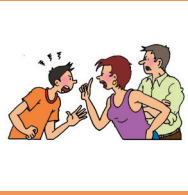
Porn

My 11-year-old son watches porn. What should I do?

At this age, boys in particular may already be interested in sexual images. Your child may search online for information or images related to sex. Or they may get images forwarded to them. They may also come across images that aren't suitable for children, such as porn. Talk to your child to see if they have any questions about sex. Also explain to your child what they can do if they encounter images that aren't suitable for children or that frighten them.

In addition, it is important to explain that porn is acted sex, intended to arouse adults, and not suitable for children. And sex in porn is different from having sex in real life, when you pay attention to what you both like. Making love in real life also involves caressing and being kind to each other.

12 - 15 years old: Puberty



Desire for independence

Adolescents want to have more autonomy. They believe they can handle things on their own and may not listen to their parents. As a result, you might find yourself arguing more with your child. However, remember, you're still very important to your child. Let your child know that they can always come to you with questions or problems.



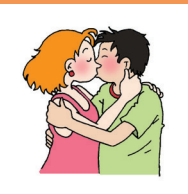
Friends are more important

Having friends and fitting in is becoming more and more important. At the same time, adolescents are very sensitive to rejection and criticism, making them vulnerable to peer pressure. As a parent, you can talk to your child about this and discuss how they can communicate their own desires and boundaries.



Social media

Adolescents spend a lot of time online. They use social media to connect with others and to flirt. They also seek information about sex online. By talking to your child about their online experiences, you show interest in their activities, you can give them guidance if needed, and you can direct them to reliable information if they have questions.



Sexual attraction

At this age, many adolescents have their first kiss. They may also fall in love or feel sexually attracted to someone. They may be attracted to someone of the opposite sex or to someone of the same sex, which your child might find confusing and make them uncertain. As a parent, let your child know that you are there for them, unconditionally.

Expressing desires and setting boundaries

How do I teach my child to set their own boundaries?

Encourage your child to trust their feelings. Explain that it is important to say clearly if they don't want something. Others should respect their wishes, just as they should respect those of others. Emphasise that your child has the right to define where their limits are; they are in control of their own body. Saying 'A' doesn't mean they have to say 'B.' Also, let your child know that adults should never engage in anything sexual with children. Reassure them that they can always tell you if they experience something unpleasant or encounter behaviour that crosses boundaries

Show that you're interested

My son is 14 and is becoming more and more independent. I'm okay with that, but I also want to know what's on his mind. How do I deal with this?

You can show that you're interested in your son in various ways: ask about his day during meals, ask about his friends and how he is feeling. Also, ask about what he does online. Even as your son becomes more independent, showing that you're interested helps you understand what he's doing, and he'll know he can come to you, whether he has questions or needs advice.

15 – 18 years old: Almost an adult



Trying out relationships

Many young people have their first relationship. They flirt, date, break up, and learn to deal with heartbreak. Some young people may not be interested yet, they may choose to wait, or they simply haven't had the chance. As a parent, you can discuss with your child what can be fun about having a relationship or dating.



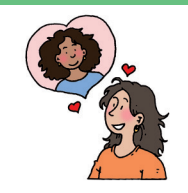
Desires and boundaries

Young people of this age may not always be good at saying what they want or what they don't want when flirting and dating. This can lead to misunderstandings or unwanted sexual experiences. As a parent, you can talk to your child about how to say what they want and what their boundaries are, and how to recognise them in others.



Sexual experiences

Young people, some later than others, start having more sexual experiences, whether masturbating, touching and fondling, or fingering and wanking. By 18 years about half of adolescents would have already had their first intercourse experience. As a parent, you want your child to make sensible and healthy choices. You can provide information about this yourself or show your child where they can find reliable information.



Lesbian, gay, and bi+

Young people who realise that they are gay, bi, or lesbian are more and more likely to say so, at least to people close to them. However, it may take some time before they share this with the outside world. Others prefer to keep it to themselves or are still trying to figure out who they are or who they want to be. Because these questions can be challenging, it is important that young people are supported by their parents and friends.

Talking about norms and values

I don't want my 16-year-old daughter to have sex yet. How can I prevent her from doing it?

Talk to your daughter, ask her what she thinks about it. Maybe she isn't ready and doesn't plan to have sex yet. In any case, forbidding it usually not the best way. If you do that, she may have sex anyway, but do it secretly, without being properly prepared. It is better to tell her what you think and why you think the way you do. If your child understands your point of view, she will be more likely to agree.

Sexting

My 17-year-old daughter sometimes sends sexy photos to her boyfriend. What is the best way to deal with this?

Sending sexually explicit images online and via social media is also called sexting. Sexting is part of relational and sexual development and is normal at this age. Many young people do it. It is okay if both young people have given their permission and if the photos are not passed on. Emphasise that no one should force her to send a sexy photo or video. And that no one is allowed to forward her photos or videos unsolicited and that she should never do so herself. It is illegal and extremely hurtful.

How do you talk about relationships and sex?

You might find it challenging to discuss relationships and sex with your child. These tips can make it easier.

1. Answer questions

Respond to your child's questions. This helps your child realise that they can come to you with questions about sex. Answer in a way that is appropriate for your child's age. If you don't know an answer right away, let them know that you don't know but that you will get back to them. Then follow through on your promise.

2. Make use of your child's experience

It is often easier to talk with your child about something they are experiencing. Make use of everyday events, social media trends, or news to start a conversation. For instance, if someone your child knows is pregnant, you can talk about pregnancy and babies. If a girl on TV is labelled as 'sexy,' you can talk about what people might mean when they use that word.

3. Pick the right moment

If you're already doing something else with your child, it is often easier to talk about things, rather than sitting down and making it into a formal discussion. For example, talk about things while in the car together, walking the dog, or cooking. This helps make sexuality an ordinary topic of conversation.

4. Ask questions yourself

Ask questions to find out what your child already knows and what they think about things. Use questions that start with who, what, where, how, or which.

5. Use a book or website

If it is challenging to discuss sexuality with your child, you can read a book together or give them a book to read on their own. You can also direct your child to a website with reliable information. For pre-teens (10+), you can refer them to pubergids.nl (in Dutch). For teenagers (13+) sense.info (also available in English) is a valuable resource. Older teenagers (16+) can learn more about themselves on seggsy.nl (in Dutch).

6. What would you do if...?

You can help prepare your child to deal with difficult situations by asking them how they would react in different situations. You can ask, "What would you do if...?" It is important to let your child think up their own answers, so give them room to think for themselves.

If you talk to children about sex, that doesn't mean they'll start having sex sooner

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).

What do I call it?

There are lots of words for sex. Choose words that you and your child are comfortable with, but be clear what you're talking about. Call genitals by their correct name or at least teach your child the correct names: penis and vulva. This shows them that it is a normal part of the body and that they can come to you with questions. Children who know the right words are also better at indicating when they have experienced something unpleasant.

To wrap it up

Relational and sexuality education 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're the person they come to with questions. Additionally, you're an important example for your child.

School also has an important task to impart 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 the school about it. Many schools communicate with parents about comprehensive sexuality education in their school plan or newsletters and many also organise parent evenings.

Even young children are interested in love and relationships

Babies and toddlers explore their bodies, pre-schoolers can experience crushes, 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 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.

With relational and sexuality education you can help your child:

- Have a positive image of themselves and their body.
- Have more self-confidence and be better at standing up for themselves.
- Express wishes and boundaries and recognise and respect them in others.
- In later life, 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.

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



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
- Sexual Education for children 0-6
- Sexual Education for children 6-9
- Sexual Education for children 9-15

Websites for parents/guardians

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

Books for parents/guardians

- 101 vragen over seksualiteit (Belle Barbé) (in Dutch)
- Kinderen en seksualiteit (Sanderijn van der Doef) (in Dutch)

Websites for children and young people

- www.pubergids.nl (for pre-teens 10+) (in Dutch)
- www.sense.info (for teenagers 13+) (also available in English)
- seggsy.nl (for older teenagers 16+) (in Dutch)

Books for children and young people

- 'Kriebels in je buik' reeks van uitgeverij Clavis (in Dutch)
- Ik vind je lief (Sanderijn van der Doef) (in Dutch)
- Saar en Jop praten over seksualiteit (Arjet Borger) (in Dutch)
- Ben jij ook op mij? (Sanderijn van der Doef) (in Dutch)
- Heel eerlijk, het ultieme boek voor jongeren (Astrid Nylander) (in Dutch)
- Het meidenlijfboek (Nina Brochman) (in Dutch)