

A close-up photograph of a man with a beard and a young boy sitting together, reading a book. The man is pointing at the text in the book, and the boy is looking at the page with interest. They are both wearing orange shirts. The background is slightly blurred, showing a white radiator and a window.

Rutgers

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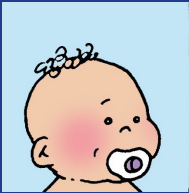
**Children's relational and
sexual development**

6-9 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 children, this includes things such as friendship and being in love, similarities and differences between boys and girls, and being able to say what you want and what you 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 are 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. As your child gets older, their body changes as well as the feelings they experience. They can feel insecure, or they can have questions about these changes. It is very comforting for children to have you, as a parent, there for to help them.



School-age child

We are 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 if 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.

Sex education 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.

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 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.

My 6-year-old son only wants to play with boys. Is that bad? Shouldn't I encourage him to play with girls as well?

At this age, children often prefer to play with children of the same sex. Many children behave like they think boys or girls are 'supposed' to behave. However, there's no need for children to conform to specific boy or girl roles. Let your child be themselves and do things they enjoy. If that means playing only with boys, that's fine.

** 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?

Children who talk to their parents about sex often start having sex later and are more likely to practice safe sex.

You are an example for your child

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, 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 are 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.

What do I call it?

I feel like the names for the genitals are so vulgar. We use made up words at home.

Having your own names for the genitals is perfectly fine. However, it is important to teach your child the correct terms as well: 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 correct terms are also better able to say when something uncomfortable has happened.

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. As a parent or guardian, 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 him- or herself. 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.



Friendship and being in love

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. Towards the end of this age period, girls and boys may start to challenge each other by playing games like tag. This kind of teasing is becoming exciting.

Children develop real friendships at this age. Some may fall in love and may even start dating.

Being in love

Children at this age may say they know what it feels like to be in love. Many children have experienced being in love themselves. They like someone a lot and want to be with that person. Some children may start dating, which at this age means spending time together during breaks or play time. They don't usually spend much time alone, and usually don't kiss each other.

Types of relationships

It is good to tell children at this age that there are different types of relationships and different types of families. Families consisting of a father and a mother are not the only type. There are also families with one parent, blended families, and families with two moms or two dads. It is good to tell children that boys can fall in love with boys, girls with girls, and that two men or two women can also get married. This way, children learn that everyone in the Netherlands, regardless of their differences, has equal opportunities, including when it comes to love and relationships.

You can also tell children that people can have different types of relationships. They can date, live together, or get married. And that relationships can also come to an end. You could give examples to help start talking about these things.

Always speak respectfully about the choices and feelings of other people, even if they are different from your own. In this way, you teach your child to interact respectfully with others.

Answering questions

- Make use of your child's curiosity. At this age, talking about relationships and sexuality doesn't yet have the stigma it has for adolescents and adults. Answering questions shows that these are normal subjects and that your child can come to you if they want to know something.
- You can explain that being in love can be enjoyable but also confusing or sad. And that being in love can make you feel shy. Explain that this is perfectly normal.

Tip

Ask your child:

- Do you know the difference between friendship and being in love?
- Do you know what being in love feels like?
- Is anyone in your class dating someone?



It is starting to get exciting

Children at this age are slowly becoming aware of the adult meaning of sexuality. For example, they understand that the genitals are not only for urinating but also have a sexual function.

Curiosity

Children are curious and ask more and more questions. They are also curious about each other's genitals. As they become more aware of social rules, you may not realise this is going on. At this age, touching their own genitals mainly happens when they are alone.

My 7-year-old likes to show his penis to his friend. Should I forbid him from doing this?

If both children are about the same age and they are both okay about it, this behaviour is fine for children of his age. However, it is important to explain to your child that they should never do anything against someone else's will, and that they should treat their own body and other people's bodies with respect. Also, they should never do anything against their own will. As a parent or guardian, it is up to you to convey your own norms and values and establish rules about such behaviours.

Wishes and boundaries

Allow children the space to try things out. Teach them to express their own wishes and boundaries well. They don't have to do things they don't like, and they shouldn't expect other people to do something they don't like. Respect your child's privacy. This way, your child learns that when they say what they like or don't like, they will be listened to. Once they have realised this, they will do it in other situations more and more often.

Rules for children's sexual 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).



Self-image and comparing with others

Children become more and more aware of the differences between themselves and others. They start comparing themselves to other people and may feel insecure about their own body.

Shame

As children enter pre-puberty, they may start to feel uncomfortable when they are naked. They may not want to undress when other people are around, and sometimes they may lock the bathroom door. By respecting your child's wishes and boundaries, you help them learn to express their wishes and boundaries in different situations.

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.

Media Images

On TV and the internet, children may come across images of people who look 'perfect.' This can make them feel insecure about themselves. One thing you could do is to look at things on the internet with your child, and if you notice that your child is feeling insecure, talk about the way media often show people —men are strong and tough, and women are slim and sexy.

Ask your child what they think is beautiful. "Is it normal for everyone to look like they do on TV or online? Is it the same in real life?" By talking about these things, your child learns to form their own opinions and understands that images in the media aren't always like what is true in real life.

What can you do as a parent?

- **Give compliments.** To help make sure your child is happy with themselves, it is important to compliment them a lot. Compliment the way they engage in an activity, not just the end result. For example, say, "I noticed that you had a lot of fun making that drawing," instead of "What a beautiful drawing." Don't compare your child with other children. If your child isn't as good as another child at something, point out something that your child is good at. "Everyone's good at different things. Your friend is good at reading, and you are good at climbing. Both are very impressive."
- **Set a good example.** Be aware of how you talk about yourself. Don't say bad things about your own body. In this way, you show your child how they can think about themselves and others. If you are always focused on dieting and losing weight, your child might think they will need to do the same to be considered attractive. Share positive thoughts about yourself with your child. What do you like about yourself or think is beautiful?



Preparing for puberty

At this age, you can start talking with your child about the changes that will occur during puberty. This helps prepare your child for what lies ahead.

The path to puberty

Although the changes may not be visible yet, a child's body is slowly preparing for puberty. Puberty is a period of rapid growth and significant changes, both physically and emotionally. When children enter puberty, they may grow really fast in a short time. This is called a growth spurt. For girls, their breasts will start developing, as will their vulva (lips), and they will have their first period. For boys, their testicles and penis will get bigger, and they will have their first ejaculation. Boys will also get facial hair and their voice will get deeper. Both boys and girls will get hair in their armpits and around the genitals. Children may start sweating more, and they might get acne.

Changes

A lot happens during puberty. Because of all these physical and emotional changes, children can become insecure and wonder if they are normal. It is important to prepare them for these changes and let them know what to expect. This way, they won't be caught off guard, and they will know they can come to you with questions.

Tip

Once children have entered in puberty, it is common for them to talk less with their parents about their own development. By talking with them earlier about the changes they might experience, your child will be well-informed and prepared for what lies ahead.

The other day my eight-year-old daughter asked what sanitary pads were. Should I explain that to her already, at this age?

Yes, you can certainly explain it to her now. Tell her that a woman uses sanitary pads when she menstruates. Menstruation means that about once a month, some blood comes out of the vagina. Sanitary pads absorb that blood. Girls typically start menstruating around the age of thirteen.



Resilience

One of the most important things you can teach a child is to express their own wishes and boundaries while recognizing and respecting those of others.

Wishes and boundaries

Being resilient means being able to stand up for yourself, and saying what you want and what you don't want. It also means being able to come up with a solution in difficult situations. It means considering what other people want or don't want and being able to recognise when someone does or doesn't want something, and checking with them about it.

Trust their own feelings

Children learn about who they are by discovering what they like or what they don't like. You can help by asking your child what they like. This helps them figure out in a healthy and safe way what they don't like. By discussing it with you, they learn how to talk about it. Teach your child to trust their own feelings. Talk with them about the difference between a 'yes-feeling,' a 'no-feeling,' and a 'not nice-feeling.' A 'yes-feeling' is something they like, a 'no feeling' is something they don't want, and a 'not nice-feeling' is something that's not quite right or doesn't feel good. In the case of a 'not nice-feeling', they can choose not to do something, check with someone, or ask for help.

What is okay and what is not okay

It is important that your child learns what behaviour is okay, and what behaviour is not okay. For example, adults should never do anything sexual with children. Tell your child that they shouldn't go anywhere with other people without letting you know, even if the person is familiar or seems nice. Tell your child that nobody's allowed to touch their body if they don't want it. Let them know that if something unpleasant happens to them, it's never their fault, and they can always tell you about it. Show them that they can always come to you.

In charge of your own body

Explain that your child is in control of their own body and that nobody's allowed to touch them if they don't want it. Tell them that adults and teenagers should never do anything sexual with children. It is not just forbidden – it is illegal.

Not so nice secrets

Ensure that your child knows they can always come to you. Explain that there are good and not-so-good secrets. It is okay to keep good secrets to oneself, but they should never keep not-so-good secrets to themselves. Tell them they can always share not-so-good secrets with you, even if someone has told them not to tell.

Tip

Read the folder '[Crossing the line](#)' (in Dutch). This folder describes sexual behaviour with children that's okay, and behaviour that isn't so good or is completely unacceptable. You can also visit centrumseksueelgeweld.nl/en for more information.

Respect boundaries

Respect your child's boundaries: if they don't want something, listen to them and talk to them. By respecting boundaries, you teach your child that they are allowed say what they don't want, and that they will be heard. For example, if your child doesn't want to give a hug when saying goodbye, you can agree on saying goodbye in a different way. Also, talk about the importance of listening to other people's wishes and boundaries.



Online resilience

Even young children are already online a lot and may have a phone or see things on other people's phones. This can be fun, but there are also risks. Children search for information and they make social contacts. They may come across images that aren't suitable for children their age. Your child could also come in contact with strangers.

Look at things with them

Once in a while look at what your child is doing online. What websites does your child visit? Which games and apps do they use? What videos do they watch? You can set up filters to prevent your child from seeing inappropriate content such as pornography or violence. If your child has their own mobile phone or laptop, you can install a program that requires your permission before any apps or games can be downloaded.

Sexually explicit images

Children may encounter sexually explicit images on TV or online. Some children stumble upon them accidentally, while others get images forwarded to them, or actively search for them. Talk to your child about the fact that they may come across things online that aren't suitable for children, such as pornography. Explain that it might be shocking and show them how to navigate away from it. Tell your child that they can come to you if they have seen something that is not okay for children or something that frightens them. Some children think it's exciting to see such things, so talk to them about what pornography is. 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.

Online contacts

Through social media and some games, strangers can easily come into contact with your child. Discuss with your child what information should not be on their online profile. Explain that it is not smart to share personal details such as their phone number and address. Establish guidelines with your child, for example, not allowing strangers into a chat session or blocking individuals who ask inappropriate questions. Reinforce the idea that you are always there for your child, both offline and online.

Photos and videos

Explain to your child that photos and videos they share can stay on the internet for a long time. Agree that they will only share such content with people they know and trust.

You can also tell your child that they should never forward nude pictures of other people without their permission. This includes stickers, photos, and videos of people they don't know. This isn't just forbidden – it is illegal.

If your child encounters something inappropriate online, they can find information and help at [helpwanted.nl](https://www.helpwanted.nl).

Tip

Let your child know that if they have questions or problems, they can always contact the children's help line at [kindertelefoon.nl](https://www.kindertelefoon.nl), either through a chat or calling at 0800-0432. Most of the questions the children's help line receives are related to relationships and sexuality.



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's 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 are 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 your child questions

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

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.

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.

Questions?

Contact the school doctor or nurse. Or go to the website of the Centre for Youth and Family (Centrum voor Jeugd en Gezin) to find a parenting agency in your area (opvoeden.nl/cjg) (in Dutch).

If you talk to children about sex, that 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).



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 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 sexual 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's 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 en 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.



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 0-6
- Sexual Education for children 9-15

Websites for parents/guardians

- seksueleopvoeding.info (in Dutch)
- 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)
- Kleine mensen grote gevoelens (Sanderijn van der Doef) (in Dutch)

Books for children and young people

- Ben jij ook op mij? (Sanderijn van der Doef) (in Dutch)
- Lekker in je lijf (Esther van der Steeg) (in Dutch)
- Lijfklets (Belle Barbé) (in Dutch)
- Mijn papa heeft een piemel (Pim van Hest) (in Dutch)
- Hier komen de baby's vandaan (David Vliestra) (in Dutch)
- Je kunt niet kiezen op wie je verliefd wordt (Pim van Hest) (in Dutch)
- Kleine hartjes en grote gevoelens (Nathalie Depoorter) (in Dutch)
- Ik zeg nee en da's oke (Nathalie Depoorter) (in Dutch)