

A close-up photograph of a woman and a young boy laughing together. The woman is on the left, wearing a white top, and the boy is on the right, wearing a blue striped t-shirt. They are both smiling broadly, showing their teeth. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor setting, possibly a kitchen or dining area.

Rutgers

For sexual and
reproductive health
and rights

**Relational and sexual
development for
children with disabilities
0-18 years old**

**Parenting tips for raising healthy
children**

Relational and sexual upbringing for children with disabilities 0 – 18 Years

Raising a child involves guiding them through all aspects of their development, including their relational and sexual development. This involves learning about love and friendship, discovering whether you are 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. This brochure describes the sexual development of children with disabilities, from when they are new-born babies to eighteen-year-old adolescents, and gives tips on how you, as a parent or guardian, can support your child.

What is sexual upbringing?

education Relational and sexual upbringing involves guiding your child through safe and healthy sexual development. Children are naturally curious about how their bodies work, where babies come from, and how to say what they like or what they don't like. Sexual upbringing helps give your child the knowledge and skills to do these things. This is no different for children with disabilities or developmental disorders.

Children with disabilities also have questions about relationships and sexuality. As your child gets older, their body changes, and they experience new emotions. Your child may feel uncertain or have questions about these things, and it is comforting for them to have you, as a parent or guardian, there for support.

My intellectually disabled daughter touches other people a lot. Should I be okay about this?

How do I teach my autistic child to deal with feelings of love and sexuality?

My blind son is unaware that others can see him when he masturbates. How do I explain this to him?

You might feel apprehensive discussing these topics with your child, especially if you are uncertain about your child's future. One thing is certain: every child has the needs for love and intimate relationships. This brochure gives you tools to discuss these topics with your child.

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

Most children with disabilities have less knowledge about relationships and sexuality. The reasons for this can vary:

- Some children and young people have difficulty understanding information.
- For some, the information may not be easily accessible.
- Sometimes, the information doesn't reflect how they experience the world or the questions they have.
- For certain disabilities there is less specific information available about relationships and sexuality.
- Adults may assume that sexuality doesn't play a role in these children's lives, leading them not to provide the children with information. However, children and young people with disabilities actually need more information for their healthy and safe relational and development.



Sexual upbringing for children with disabilities requires special attention

Talking about relationships and sexuality

Parents and caregivers often find it challenging to discuss relationships and sexuality. Typically, 'veiled' language doesn't work with children with disabilities, as it may lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretation. Communication needs to be explicit, and this is not always easy.

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 for 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 (for the future) to make conscious and safe choices, express their desires and boundaries, and recognise and respect those in others.

In company

Don't shy away from discussing sexuality in your child's presence. Acknowledge your child's sexuality, even when others are around. It can be hurtful for a child with a disability if a conversation about relationships, love, or pregnancy comes to a halt when they enter the room. Involve your child in the conversation – you can continue talking with them in private later.

Encourage independence

Children with disabilities often have fewer opportunities to explore things on their own. They may be dependent on other people for care, they may be less mobile, and they may have a relatively small groups of friends. This makes it challenging for them, when they are children, to discover themselves in the way most children do, or when they are teenagers, to engage in relationships and figure out what they like or what they don't like. Therefore, encourage your child to build and maintain friendships. Guide your child in forming friendships, as this lays a solid foundation for your child's future social interactions.

Insecure and vulnerable

Young people with disabilities are more often insecure. They may feel different and be less proud of themselves. This makes them sensitive to other people's attention. Additionally, they are more dependent on others, for such things as their physical care. Combined with a lack of knowledge, these factors make these children particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse.

It is important to focus on building a positive self-image and teaching your child to express their wishes and boundaries. Tell your child that adults should never engage in any sexual activities with children. And reassure your child that they can always tell you if something unpleasant, such as sexually inappropriate behaviour, has happened.





Intellectual disability

For these children, there is a gap between their physical development and their social-emotional development.

Read more about this on page 20.



Visual impairment

These children need aids to learn about what other people look like.

Read more about this on page 24.



Auditory and/or communication impairment

These children may lack information but they often don't realise that they are missing something, and often don't know what they are missing.

Read more about this on page 26.



Physical disability

Dependence on care from other people can lead to the blurring of boundaries.

Read more about this on page 28.



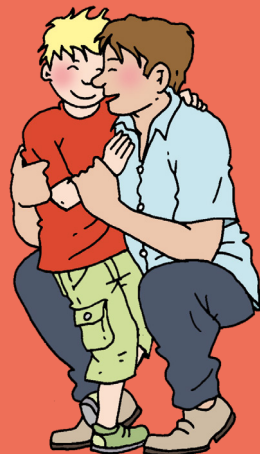
Autism

Children with an autism spectrum disorder need concrete and explicit information, including about sexuality and relationships.

Read more about this on page 30.

Your role 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 is not. 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 themselves. 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. It also enables you to prepare them, for instance for puberty.



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 help your child in understanding the appropriate context for such actions. 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 is 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 is not 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 is 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 is 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 or guardian, 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.

Rules for playing doctor

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

Giving an answer

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 is not 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 are 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 is not done in a sexual way (like it is with teenagers or adults). But they do hide it from adults, since they've learned that it is against the rules. 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.

Insecure

My 9-year-old is very insecure and dissatisfied with his body. What can I do to give him a better self-image?

To make sure your son is happy with himself, it is important to compliment him often. Compliment him on the way he does something, not on the result. And don't compare your child with other children. If your child is less good at something than someone else, point out something that he is good at. Also compliment your child on their appearance and emphasise that everyone is different and everyone is beautiful and unique.

Boys and girls things

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

At this age, children often prefer to play with children of the same sex. Many children at this age also start to behave the way they think a boy or a girl 'should' behave (gender stereotyping), which is fine, but of course, 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.



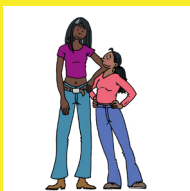
First date

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, feel free to 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 everybody 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+) (in Dutch), sense.info (13+) (English available) and seggsy.nl (16+) (in Dutch).

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 he or she has any questions about sex. Also explain to your child what he or she 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 are still very important to your child. Let your child know that they can always come to you with questions or problems.



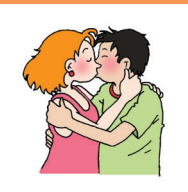
Friends are more important

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 different 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 are 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 are 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 are interested helps you understand what he is doing, and he will 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

This is when young people start to have more sexual experiences, whether masturbating, touching and fondling, or fingering and wanking. Some do things a little earlier, others a little later. Half of 18-year-olds have already had sexual intercourse for the first time. 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 he or she 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 is not 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, he or 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 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.

Intellectual disability. What is different?

A young person may be physically capable of being intimate with someone, but might not understand how to deal with their own romantic and sexual feelings and the feelings of other people.

Children's bodies grow and change, and it is no different for children with intellectual disabilities. They go through puberty, just like their peers. Some young people with intellectual disabilities may experience puberty a bit later, but for most children with intellectual disabilities, physical development happens at the same pace as that of their peers.

Children with intellectual disabilities learn more slowly and at a later age how to interact with others. Social and emotional development progresses more slowly, creating a disparity between the growth of the body and what a child can handle socially and emotionally. Young people with intellectual disabilities comprehend less, and they process information more slowly. Consequently, they learn more slowly about what is allowed and what is not allowed, and the potential consequences of their behaviour. As a parent, you may need to repeat things quite often, which can be challenging at times.

Pictures say more

As much as you can, use pictures, photos, drawings, or pictograms when explaining something. For instance, if you tell your child what to call the genitals, point them out on a picture: "This is a penis, and this is a vulva."

When explaining to your child about when it is appropriate to touch their genitals, and when it is not appropriate, you can also use pictograms or photos of the bedroom or the bathroom, and a photo of the classroom. You can explain, for example: "Here, you can touch your penis, and there, you can't." This way, you can show your child that it is not appropriate to touch themselves in a certain context, such as when others are present. And show them that it is a private thing. Some parents wonder if, by explaining it this way, they are not encouraging their child to touch their own genitals. That is not the case. You are teaching your child what is private and providing clear boundaries about when something is appropriate, and when it is not.

What many parents want to know

How do you explain sexual intercourse to a young person?

Use a book with pictures. Explain that intimacy is different for everyone and that it is something adults do. Most people are intimate with someone they really like. If both people want to, they start with kissing and caressing. Intimacy can also mean touching each other's genitals. This gives a pleasant feeling, and the penis can become erect, and the vulva can get moist. Both people can then reach a climax. Keep in mind that with kissing and intimacy, never do anything you don't want to do (yet), and never do anything the other person doesn't want to do (yet).

When discussing sexual intercourse, you can explain that, when both people are sufficiently aroused, the erect penis goes into the moist vulva. And then they move back and forth. When the boy or man ejaculates, sperm comes out of the penis. This is how a girl or a woman can become pregnant. Using birth control prevents unplanned pregnancies.

Safe sex and birth control

Talk with your child about safe sex, birth control, and wishes and boundaries. A contraceptive injection or an intrauterine device (IUD) are both good alternatives to the birth control pill. Visit the GP together with your child for more information.

Show your child that they can always come to you with questions and problems about relationships and sexuality.

How do I tell my intellectually disabled daughter that she can't become a mother, or at least, not yet?

If your child has a mild intellectual disability and expresses a desire to have children, it is important to talk about it. For instance, ask: "I see you like to play mommy with your doll. Would you like to be a mother yourself someday?" or "What do you like about being a mother?" Listen carefully to what your child says. Sometimes, a child wants to be a parent because they want to 'fit in' or 'not be alone'. If your child has a clear desire to have children, explain that adults think long and hard before starting a family. You can use resources such '[My Child Wants a Child](#)' (in Dutch), a brochure from ASVZ to help you in talking with your child.



What many parents want to know

Sometimes my 13-year-old son proudly shows his erect penis to people he doesn't know at all. How can I break this habit?

Even younger boys without disabilities sometimes show their penis to others. They are proud, they are in the process of discovering their own body and learning social rules. Young people with an intellectual disability lag behind in their social-emotional development. They try the same behaviour, but they do it later. And their adolescent body can react to things more like an adult body.

You can tell your son that he should be proud of his body, but that he should not show his penis to everyone. Explain that some things are more for yourself. Please note: your child won't show the desired behaviour after just one conversation. Repeat your message, be consistent and be clear.

You can say, for example:

"I realise you are proud of your penis. But I don't want you to show it to other people. Other people may not always like it and they may be shocked by it."

Or, if he touches his penis in public, you can say:

"I realise that touching your penis feels nice. But it is only allowed in your bedroom."



The desire to have children

Visual impairment. What is different?

Children who can see learn partly through imitation. They imitate adults and peers and thus learn and adopt rules and non-verbal behaviour. This is difficult for blind and visually impaired children. They need additional information and support, for example to assess whether they have sufficient privacy to masturbate or have sex with a partner.

They are just as curious about relationships and sex as their peers. It is just difficult for them to find information themselves. For example, they may be less able to make use of the internet, television, newspapers or leaflets. They need parents, peers and school to provide them with reliable information.

Blind and visually impaired young people also experiment with love, relationships, sex and intimacy. They are often a little later with their first experiences of dating or sexual experience. This is because they make contact with someone they are interested in in a different way. For example, they are less likely to flirt from a distance or to make eye contact. The bodies of blind and visually impaired adolescents grow and change in the same way as sighted adolescents, but these children are more likely to be insecure about their bodies and changes during puberty. This is because they can not properly estimate their own body's proportions and it is harder for them to compare themselves with others.

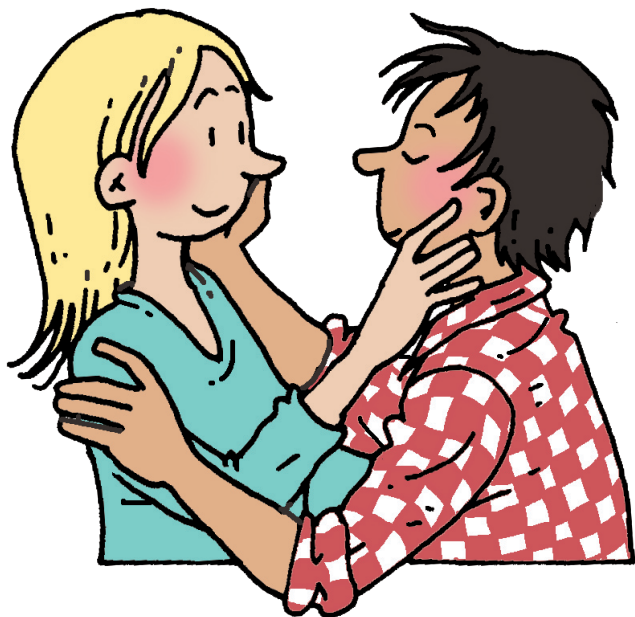
What can you do as a parent?

It is difficult for blind and partially sighted children to get to know the differences between boys and girls. As a parent you can tell your child whether they are a boy or a girl and you can explain the differences. It is helpful to do this using dolls or a model of the human body.

What many parents want to know

My 14-year-old daughter asked me how big normal breasts are. What should I tell her?

Tell your daughter that there is no such thing as a normal breast size. Some breasts are big, some are small. Nipples are also never the exactly the same. Each person's body is different and unique. For instance, one person might have curly hair while another has straight hair. Sometimes blind and visually impaired teenagers ask a sister, mother or good friend if they can feel their breasts to find out how big they are. This is fine as long as you get along well and you agree that you will stop if either of you gets uncomfortable. Tell her that bodies keep changing and growing throughout puberty, usually until about the age of 18. And that she can be proud of her own body, regardless of the size of her breasts (or, in the case of a boy, his penis) or other physical features. All bodies are beautiful in their own way.



Auditory and/or communication impairment. What is different?

Language and word comprehension are very important for these children and young people. You can help your child understand words using concepts, gestures and explanations.

Deaf or hearing-impaired children and children with a developmental language disorder (DLD) have different kinds of impairments, but they also have something in common. They experience problems in communicating with the people around them. They miss information and often don't realise that they are missing something and they also don't know what they are missing. So they don't ask questions. Offer your child clear information, in simple language and at an easy pace.

In hearing-impaired children, touching is part of how they communicate, for example, if they want to attract someone's attention. They are also used to others touching them to make contact, including people who are accompanying them or providing them care. As a result, for these children the difference between functional touching and intimate touching is not always clear. They may not realise when physical contact has crossed the line, whether it is the way they touch someone else or the way someone else touches them.

For children with a developmental language disorder, touch can be a substitute for verbal communication. For them, it can also be unclear when touch crosses the line. Children with a hearing or communication disability see images about relationships and sexuality in the media, but unlike their peers, they often miss the accompanying text or don't fully understand the context. Clearly explain texts, images and social behaviour.

Word choice

There are lots of different words for things having to do with sex. Choose words that you and your child are comfortable with, but make it clear what you are talking about. Use the correct names for genitals or teach your child the correct names: penis and vulva. This shows that it is a normal part of the body, and your child can come to you with questions. Children who know the correct words are also better able to say when something unpleasant has happened.

What many parents want to know

I have trouble talking with my child in a nuanced way. This is especially important when discussing relationships and sexuality. How do I deal with that?

We often use veiled language when we talk about relationships and sexuality. We say 'sleeping together' when we mean 'sexual intercourse' or 'making love'. For children with an auditory and/or communication disability, it is important to provide clear and unambiguous information. One way to do this is to use clear pictures from children's books, or you can explain things using hand gestures. If you can, teach your child several words for the same concept, even if one word is used quite often and the other one is not.

You will have to overcome your hesitation in order to talk with your child about sexuality. Don't avoid a conversation – in whatever form – about relationships and sexuality. Your child needs this information in order to be resilient, both now and later. Find a way to talk with your child about relationships and sexuality. You can learn gestures about relationships and sexuality at school or find them at seksuelevorming.nl/speciaalonderwijs-gebaren.



Physical disability: What is different?

It is important to encourage the independence of children and young people with physical disabilities.

Babies are often cuddled and held on laps, but for children with physical disabilities, this might be less straightforward. Medical devices can hinder physical contact. Despite this, it is important to give your child a sense of security and touch them frequently.

For children with physical disabilities, playfully exploring their own bodies can be challenging. They may depend on others for care, and be used to others attending to their bodies, sometimes including their genital areas. While this means they may not easily feel embarrassed about their naked bodies, it also means they might not be able to distinguish between functional and sexual touch. They may also be less aware of which parts of their bodies can be touched by other people, and which parts should not be touched.

Boys and girls with physical disabilities might feel that they are different from other children due to their bodies, their limitations, or their scars. This can make them insecure. This can also mean that they feel less proud of themselves and are more sensitive to other people's attention. Some children experience puberty later, while others may go through it earlier. Puberty might also last longer.

Children with physical disabilities often have different questions about relationships and sexuality, or quite specific questions. These can include wondering about their fertility or about whether their condition is hereditary. They may also encounter more challenges related to sex. For more information about physical disabilities and the impact of medication, you can visit [seksualiteit.nl](https://www.seksualiteit.nl) (for adults).

What many parents want to know

My son recently asked me why a girl would ever want to date him. "In the bar, there are ten guys next to me, and not one of them has a disability. I guess I'm not really relationship material, am I?" I was shocked that this is how he thinks. What can I say to him?

Young people with physical disabilities are often insecure and afraid of rejection. And indeed, they may face rejection more frequently than their peers without disabilities. This doesn't mean they will never find a partner. Reassure your son, talk with him. Ask what he thinks is challenging about finding a partner. Tell him about the website opeigenbenen.nu (in Dutch), which provides tips on making and maintaining relationships. Be proud of him as he forms and maintains new relationships, and help him, if needs be, in dealing with a breakup.



Autism: What is different?

Prepare children with autism for the changes in puberty, such as menstruation and the first ejaculation. It is important for adolescents to know what to expect.

Children with autism require clear and unambiguous information. They have difficulty learning how to interact with others and how to manage their own emotions. They don't necessarily figure out the 'unwritten rules' for what is and is not appropriate. This can lead to feelings of frustration, insecurity, and anxiety, as well as misunderstandings or even inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour. Children with autism usually have fewer friends, and there are few role models for them in the media.

Most adolescents with autism also want to have relationships and are interested in sex. And they often succeed in having relationships. Young people with autism need assistance in learning how to express what they like and what they don't like, and how to listen to what the other person, including a boyfriend or girlfriend, is saying and what they mean. They require clear and concrete information about what to do if they or the other person isn't happy with the relationship.

Like other adolescents, most adolescents with autism masturbate. They can learn that this is something you don't do when other people are around. Excessive masturbation, public masturbation, and arousal from 'other' stimuli (such as objects or body parts) are more common in young people with autism.

Clear and direct language

Children with autism often don't understand veiled language, or they misunderstand what's being said. Therefore, always be very explicit in your explanations and make sure to check whether your child has understood it correctly.

What many parents want to know

My son isn't able to empathise with others. I am afraid that he won't listen to the other person in a relationship and will cross the line. I want to help him, and protect him, but how?

Autistic children need clear information to figure out their own and other people's wishes and boundaries. As a parent, you should be very clear about this and sometimes even feel like you are exaggerating. You can explain to your child how to ask the other person questions and how your child can communicate what they want or don't want. You can practice this together. You can also use pictograms, photos, and step-by-step plans.

I am having trouble setting boundaries when it comes to my child's sexual behaviour. When does something cross the line?

Most children try out various behaviours to discover where the boundary lies. To assess whether your child's behaviour is okay, you can use the rules depicted in the next chapter.

Be aware that your child's sexual development is not only related to their physical development, but also to their socio-emotional development. By paying attention to this you can better assess whether your child's behaviour matches their developmental age. If in doubt, discuss your concerns with the GP.

Crossing the line

Many parents find it challenging to strike the right balance between protecting their child and giving them space to learn on their own. Resilience involves teaching about desires and boundaries. It is not just about protecting them from abuse.

Here are some tips to teach your child to express their wishes and boundaries, making them more resilient against sexual misconduct:

- Ask your child to colour in green on a drawing of a body the places where it feels comfortable being touched by others and red where it doesn't. Also, explain which body parts are private and should only be touched by certain people.
- Let your child know that they can determine their own boundaries. Accept it if your child, for example, doesn't want to give a kiss. Offer an alternative like, "Maybe you'd rather shake hands?" This way, your child learns from an early age that they can set boundaries, and these will be respected.
- Teach your child how to recognise another person's wish or boundary. Explain that there are different ways the other person might show where their boundary is, such as shaking their head, getting angry, frowning, or looking away.
- Make it clear to your child that adults should never engage in any sexual activities with a child. It is forbidden.
- Tell your child that if someone crosses their boundaries, it is never the child's fault. Someone should always check with the child if it is okay to do something or to touch them. Also, let your child know they can always tell you or someone they trust if something unpleasant happens.

Yes-or-no feelings

Sometimes, young people do things they don't want to do, at least not yet. Explain the difference between a yes and a no feeling. A yes feeling means you want something, and a no feeling means you don't want something. When in doubt, it is usually a no. Tell your child that they can say yes or no, and the other person should listen, and that your child should also listen if another person says yes or no. You can ask: "What would you do if...?" Discuss the answer together. What would you do if ... ?

- You want to kiss someone, but the other person doesn't want to?
- Someone asks you to undress in front of a camera?
- A peer touches you when you don't want them to?
- An older person touches you when you don't want them to?
- You really like someone and you want to kiss them, but you don't want to have sex yet?



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 imbalance 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 their 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)

If you suspect sexual abuse

If you suspect something is wrong, always ask about it. Ask if your child has experienced anything unpleasant. Explain that you can help your child if something has happened against their will, even if they are not sure. Reassure your child, make it clear that you won't get angry. Explain that they haven't done anything wrong. If your child is a victim of sexual misconduct, discuss the next steps together (GP, report the incident, talk to a professional). You can also contact [centrumseksueelgeweld.nl/en](https://www.centrumseksueelgeweld.nl/en) for assistance.



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 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 or website

If you find it challenging to discuss sexuality with your child, you can read a book together or give them a book to read. You can also direct your child to a website with reliable information. For pre-teens (10+), pubergids.nl (in Dutch) is useful, and for teenagers (13+) sense.info (also available in English) provides valuable information. For older teens (16+), seggsy.nl (in Dutch) offers insights into self-discovery.

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.

Masturbation

Many parents find it challenging to discuss masturbation with their children, even though most young people, including those with disabilities, experiment with it. Boys tend to do so slightly more than girls. In this way, they discover their bodies and their sexual feelings, and learn what they like and don't like. Masturbation is part of sexual development. Due to your child's disability, discussing masturbation might be difficult. You can help by talking about masturbation in general terms and then asking your child how they feel about it. As a parent, you can also share your own norms and values.

Homosexuality

Most teenagers discover their sexual orientation during puberty, which may happen later for those with disabilities. Homosexuality and bisexuality are as normal as heterosexuality but occur less frequently. Children might fear not being accepted or being bullied. Respect your child's feelings and try to understand them. Even if it goes against your own norms and values, keep the conversation open. You can't choose who you fall in love with. Make it clear that your child can be who they are. Give them the time to process their feelings and thoughts. Don't force a conversation if your child is not ready yet, but let them know that you will be there for them no matter who they fall in love with.

To wrap it up

Sexual upbringing is a task for 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 be 'dating'. However, younger children approach love and relationships differently than older children and certainly differently than adults. Children are often not 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.

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

For sex education of adolescents with a chronic illness or physical disability, Rutgers has the Totally Sexy guide for parents, the magazine Totally Sexy for adolescents themselves and a toolkit for counsellors.

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

- Children's relational and sexual development 0-18
- Children's relational and sexual development 0-6
- Children's relational and sexual development 6-9
- Children's relational and sexual development 9-15

Websites for parents/guardians

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

www.seksualiteit.nl (in Dutch)

- This website provides information on physical disability and the impact of medication use.

www.opeigenbenen.nu (in Dutch)

- This is a website for young people with chronic conditions and physical disabilities in transition but also for parents and professionals.

www.sense.info (also available in English)

- The website for young people aged 13-25 on sexuality.

www.pubergids.nl (in Dutch)

- Online guide for adolescents aged 10 and above on relationships and sexuality and the changes of puberty.

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)