



Dealing with First Loves

A child's first love is a pivotal step. Follow these dos and don'ts when dealing with this delicate issue.

WORDS DR NICOLA DAVIES

You may not enjoy thinking about your young child's sexuality, but most children will start developing romantic, if not sexual, feelings from an early age. Experts agree this is a normal part of development and there is no need to over-react, or feel overwhelmed, when you hear your child is in love for the first time.

Early Sexual Exploration: A Developmental Milestone

Your pre-schooler's first childhood romance is an important part of his or her social, emotional, and physical development and growth. In other words, your child's display of their developing sexuality is normal and to be expected.

As they mature, children inevitably become aware of pleasurable sensations associated with their bodies. They also begin showing an interest in the anatomical differences between girls and boys. Psychologists Heather Coleman and Grant Charles remind parents that in most instances, children's sexual play and interest in their own and other children's bodies is an expression of natural curiosity as they explore the social world.

Children also act out and often dramatize what they observe in their immediate social surroundings. Holding hands, kissing, and feeling excited when they fall in love with peers is more about their developing curiosity than about sexual activity. Although this is not an issue for children, it

usually becomes one for parents, teachers and other caregivers who are not sure how to relate to a child's spontaneous interest in their own and their peer's bodies, says Karen Petty, Assistant Professor of Family Sciences at Texas Woman's University.

What to Say and Do

1 **Talk to your kids about sexuality.** By talking to children about sexuality from an early age, you demonstrate that it's an acceptable, subject, say child psychologists Karin Suesser and Matthew Doll. It will, they say, ensure that your children feel comfortable about asking you questions.

Worried that you'll encourage early experimentation? That's a myth, say experts.

2 Provide age-appropriate information. Bear in mind your child's age when you talk about sexuality. Parents often make the mistake of talking to kids about sexual matters using their own childhood experience as a point of reference. Your child's social world is different from the one you grew up in, which is why it's better to try and understand matters from your child's point of view.

3 Set the example. Be mindful when it comes to adult displays of affectionate behaviour in the presence of your child, says public health specialist Madeline Vann. Your children are more likely to do what you do, rather than what you say

4 Encourage socialising – and boundaries. It's important for your child to socialise with a variety of friends, and not to spend all their playtime with a single child, says Vann. A well-rounded social schedule lets your child develop appropriate social skills, friendships, and boundaries.

What Not to Say or Do

1 Don't ignore or ridicule your child's feelings and behaviour. Parents and older siblings should never make fun of, or show disrespect towards, a younger child's feelings and actions, says Vann. As alarming or amusing as it might seem to you and your spouse, note that your child experiences exciting and strong emotions; your child feels lovable and loved not just by you, but by a playmate for the first time. Your child will feel ashamed and hurt if ridiculed for having romantic feelings, and you could permanently damage your relationship.

2 Don't overreact. You might feel justifiably alarmed when your four-year-old announces that she kissed her 'boyfriend.' However, remember that what you say – as well as your facial expression and tone of voice – will shape your child's impressions of sexuality, says Steven Dowshen, a paediatric endocrinologist at the Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Delaware. If you can respond with calm, neutral tone of voice, your child will get the message that there is nothing shameful or dirty about developing sexual curiosity.

3 Don't put pressure on your child. Of course you're interested in what your kids are doing, but try to keep questions general and open-ended, as well as to a minimum, suggests Jody Johnston Pawel, author of *The Parent's Toolshop*. Ask just one or two questions, such as "How did you learn about this?"; "What were you doing?"; or, "How did it feel when you held hands?" Avoid questions your child can answer with a 'yes' or 'no.'

4 Do be positive, nonchalant and show interest. Ask your child about the qualities he/she likes about the person. Comment on how those positive traits are good traits for people to have and how people often like people with those traits. Show that you are open to listening to the child and let the child initiate the conversation.

Your child's natural interest in the opposite sex is part of their developing sexuality and overall socialisation; it should not be a source of unnecessary alarm, taboo, or embarrassment for parents or children. If you continue to have concerns, talk to your child's paediatrician or another professional, but remember that healthy childhood interactions will set your child on the path for lifelong happiness. ■

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