

## Handout for carers and adoptive parents

### Sexual health and sexuality

#### Stages of development

This handout includes indications of sexual development throughout the age range, with more detail for the 12–14 and 15–17 age range. It draws on the Tavistock Books *Understanding Your Child* series published by Jessica Kingsley.

#### 4–6 years

This is a time where children begin to compete with the same-sex carer or adoptive parent for attention. This is important for later sexual identity.

They become aware of differences between the two sexes and begin to compare themselves.

#### 6 years

This is a period where children are quizzical about the physical differences, and children may make explorations of each other's bodies. This can, within limits, be normal. However, if a more persistent pattern emerges it may be beneficial to review the activity.

Ideas about where babies come from and sexual intercourse may be confused. Often babies are put there from the outside with the daddy often involved in the scenario in some way. Being given too much information can raise anxieties and embarrassment for some children. Honesty and straightforward explanations are important, but some thoughts may be too strong and disturbing for a young child to cope with.

#### 7 years

The seven-year-old is gaining an increasingly abstract awareness, although still fairly concrete in some areas. Questions about sex and adult relationships are less intense if they have been answered adequately.

There continues a sense of sexual identity about being boys or girls. Curiosity and interest will continue but it may appear subdued for this age.

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## 8 years

For the eight-year-old it is the period before the emotional and physical changes of puberty begin to assert themselves. The middle years of childhood are where girls and boys reinforce their identity as different from each other. Boys play with boys and girls group with girls. However, sex and sexuality are not as evident in their behaviour as when puberty takes hold.

For this age, jokes about sex are of the lavatory type; giggling, with a 'curtain' drawn temporarily over the sex in the adult sense.

## 9 years

As with the eight-year-old, sexual matters remain less in the forefront. However, it is a time where exposure to general reference and information in the media can lead to misunderstandings about sex as half-truths can manifest themselves. Talk in the playground can provoke questions that may, if not dealt with sensitively, create anxieties. Explanations may need to be repeated, as feelings and understanding may vary as they try to put together the 'facts of life' into a manageable format!

For some nine-year-old girls menstruation may have started and for this reason talks about menstruation need to be given to both boys and girls. However, it is important to remember that although children of this age may appear to have a more developed sexual language, their understanding of the deeper meanings may be questionable.

## 10 years

For ten-year-olds the issues of sex for boys and girls can be quite different. While boys are still in the giggling and joke stage, girls may have started to menstruate and be more physically developed than boys.

Boys and girls can appear to have a greater knowledge of sexual matters, but their deeper understanding can be less clear. Anxieties can start to emerge perhaps more in girls, as bodily changes become more obvious and periods start.

It is a time when it is important for them to have someone who they can talk to. For boys and girls there may be many common issues relating to sexuality. However, from this age onward there will be an increasing number of feelings and experiences that will be different and individual for boys and girls.

## 11 years

Developing a sense of gender identity becomes increasingly significant for this age and the differences between girls and boys can be considerable.

Physical and emotional development in girls, while varied, become visible as breasts grow and hips widen. In boys growth is minimal with some broadening of the shoulders and enlargement of the scrotum.

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## 12–14 years

The period between 12 and 14 years is a particularly active time for many children as hormonal changes in their bodies produce physical differences and new emotional experiences, highlighting issues relating to their sexuality. The physical changes that happen are out of their control, occurring whether they are ready for them or not. It is a period of sexual curiosity, sexual urges and sexual anxieties that have powerful influences on their relationships with themselves, friends and their family.

The time between 12 and 14 is one of confusion and puzzlement of the child's evolving sense of identity for the adult they are yet to become. Adoptive parents and carers, too, witness and experience changes as they try to adapt to the intense and yet distant relationship with their child.

Children of this age often have a preoccupation with their bodily changes as males may produce semen and girls may begin to ovulate. There is a sense of what is happening to their body running alongside a feeling of excitement or anxiety.

Masturbation appears to be a common experience amongst this age group for both boys and girls. Most common worries expressed are: How often? Is it healthy? They may feel guilty about the experimentation while finding it intensely gratifying.

Boys may have the additional worry of how their urine and semen can be produced by the penis.

Adoptive parents and carers, too, may find the subject disturbing and the way they respond to this part of their child's development may be influenced by their own experiences and knowledge.

Making new relationships that include both their own sex and the opposite sex gathers momentum during this period. Girls will often be drawn towards intense relationships with other girls while having more distant and negative relationships with their adoptive/foster mother. Boys, too, form close groups of similar friends and loosen their bond with their adoptive/foster mother, especially when surrounded by other males.

Homosexuality is often a subject of discussion for this age group as they try to sort out their own sense of identity alongside the confused desires and urges they may sometimes experience toward their same sex. For some adolescents the anxiety felt about their sexuality can be a significant source of worry for them.

## 15–17 years

Adolescence is the period of transition from childhood to adulthood and is defined by the biological changes of puberty. Puberty encompasses the cycle of rapid growth during which individuals become capable of sexual reproduction; 9–17 years in girls and 10–18 years in boys.

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This is a time of great physical growth and change. Teenagers may be obsessed by their appearance, judging themselves against their peers. They have a strong desire to be 'normal', 'perfect', and any imperfections – even a few spots – may be seen as a huge problem that lowers self-esteem and confines them to their room.

Most girls will have started their periods by this time and secondary sexual characteristics such as breast development and increased body hair are well established. Although girls are able to physically carry a baby by this time, their emotional growth is only just beginning.

Sexual changes in boys are linked to deepening of the voice, increased body and facial hair, enlargement of the penis and testicles and production of semen. Their bodies become more muscular and a massive increase in growth is likely. The onset of maturation may also play a factor in development. Early or 'precocious' puberty in girls may be linked to low self-esteem and dissatisfaction with body image, and late onset in boys is linked to feelings of depression and low self-worth.

Young people are very curious about sex. It is very common for many adolescents to masturbate and fantasise about sex. It may be hard for adoptive parents or carers to acknowledge that their child may be sexually active and easier not to discuss it. However, experimentation is a natural part of life and it is important that teenagers have access to good-quality, reliable information. Sex is a high-risk activity that can result in unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and emotional upheaval without recourse to necessary information. Young people can also find themselves in situations where they are unable to cope, and vulnerable to abuse without the right levels of support.

Some adoptive parents and carers may find it hard to cope with the child's emerging sexuality. It emphasises that the child is moving away, becoming their own person. For the young person, their changing body and preoccupation with sexual thoughts may be at some times fascinating and at others overwhelming.

Teenagers may also experience confusion about their sexuality. Relationships with friends may be very intense, especially with the same sex and they may even find themselves attracted sexually to that person. This is all part of ordinary development and whilst young people may go on to develop homosexual relationships, this is not usually the case.

Sexual behaviour in girls and boys is very different. In boys sexual drive is strong and easily satisfied by masturbation. In girls it is much more romantic and emotional and less physical. Girls usually fantasise on distant crushes such as pop stars or actors and masturbation usually starts later than in boys. Boys usually start having sex earlier than girls. On average, by the age of 17, half of boys and a third of girls will have had sex. By 18 these figures rise to half of girls and three quarters of boys. Early sexual intercourse may not necessarily be considered as deviant, especially if the young person's behaviour at home and school is unproblematic, they have used precautions and have a good relationship with life in general. However, peer pressure may sometimes encourage adolescents to have sex before they are ready and may result in 'risky behaviour'.

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