

SUPPORTING **CHILDREN** WITH LOVE AND CARE

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

**on body image and
curiosity about the body
in childhood**

**From age 1
until starting school**



Bundesinstitut für
Öffentliche Gesundheit



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INTRODUCTION

WHAT THIS BROCHURE IS ABOUT

This brochure contains information about what you as parents should know about children's physical and psychosexual development in order to be able to support your child in an age-appropriate way. This is done in consideration of various aspects of child development. These are important so that your child can experience sexuality responsibly in adolescence and adulthood.

KEY TOPICS OF THE BROCHURE ARE:

- # Children's curiosity and exploratory behavior
- # Building trusting and reliable bonds and relationships
- # Teaching appropriate language
- # Passing on values and social norms
- # Acceptance of boundaries and intimacy

For children, it's not about "sexual" behavior as adults see it. They discover the world with all their senses. They want to find out who they are. It's about gender roles, experiencing their body, reliable relationships, finding their identity, feelings of shame and setting and accepting boundaries.

The different developmental processes are as numerous and diverse as children are.



EVERY CHILD SETS THEIR OWN PACE

It's important to remember that every child is different. Every child develops at their own pace. Just as one child gets their first tooth earlier and another a little later, this is also how children have all other physical and sensory experiences. They learn to speak or walk or go to the bathroom on their own at different times. Children who are more cautious gain different experiences than children who boldly charge into the world.

CHILDHOOD AND ADULT SEXUALITY ARE FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT

Sexuality develops over the course of a lifetime. It is important to note that the sexual development of children and their experiences are fundamentally different from adult sexuality and must be distinguished from it. A child's interaction with their body and their needs is playful, spontaneous, curious and not oriented towards specific goals. The essential foundations of gender identity, body perception and the ability to bond and relate are laid in childhood. These are all important building blocks for later sexuality and relationships. A child who is just exploring their own body and happens to caress their genitals does this to feel good, just as if they were lovingly touching other parts of the body. The genitals or certain actions have no special significance for the child, especially not in the sense of sexuality as adults understand it.



ABOUT THE STRUCTURE OF THE BROCHURE

Because every child develops at their own pace, we have divided the most important information and topics into two main age groups: 1 to 3 years of age (from page 9) and 4 to 6 years of age (from page 36). In this brochure you will also find four interviews with renowned experts on central topics of sexual development and education.

To understand children's body image it's a good idea to take off your "adult glasses" and look at things in the way children see them. Children behave in a childlike, curious, uninhibited and non-intentional way.

INTERVIEW

HOW DOES SEXUALITY DEVELOP?

From baby to child to adult. In the course of their lives, every person goes through a wide range of different experiences that influence their sexual and personal development. Which ones are important?

An interview with Urszula Martyniuk –
Professor of Sexology in Hamburg.

Ms. Martyniuk, how does sexuality develop?

Sexuality largely develops from non-sexual experiences and encounters. Sexual development begins before birth or even before conception. This is because it begins with the parents' wishes and ideas about the child, for example: Is the child welcome in their life? What expectations and wishes do they have for the child – even this influences how parents interact with their child after the child is born. Whether they are able to fulfill the child's needs and desires and allow tenderness is of great importance, because the parent-child relationship has a lasting impact on the child's sexual development. Everyday, repetitive experiences and encounters in important relationships influence both the personality and sexual development of a child.

What specific experiences do you mean?

Every child has basic needs for closeness and security, but also for autonomy and self-determination. These needs should be met. This allows them to learn that they are safe and can try things out at the same time. For example, when the child experiences riding a bike or scooter in a safe place without help. At the same time, the child knows that if they fall, they can seek comfort from their parents. This ability manifests itself later in adulthood in the ability to recognize and express one's own needs and to live them in a relationship. This is also the basis for a satisfying and healthy sexuality.

Another example is how the child interacts with and sees their body. Through the tenderness and touch of the parents, through loving care and attention to the child's body, the child learns to accept and love their body as it is. But also by moving or romping around and enjoying their bodies. This relationship with their own body also has an impact on how the child deals with their own body in terms of their own sexuality later as an adult.

What makes parents feel uncertain about children's sexuality?

Adults often incorrectly interpret children's sexuality, especially sexual behavior such as masturbation, according to the criteria of adult sexuality. Children's sexuality differs fundamentally from that of adults, which is goal-oriented and focused on arousal and sexual organs. However, childhood sexuality is spontaneous, playful and arises out of curiosity.

How can parents deal with this?

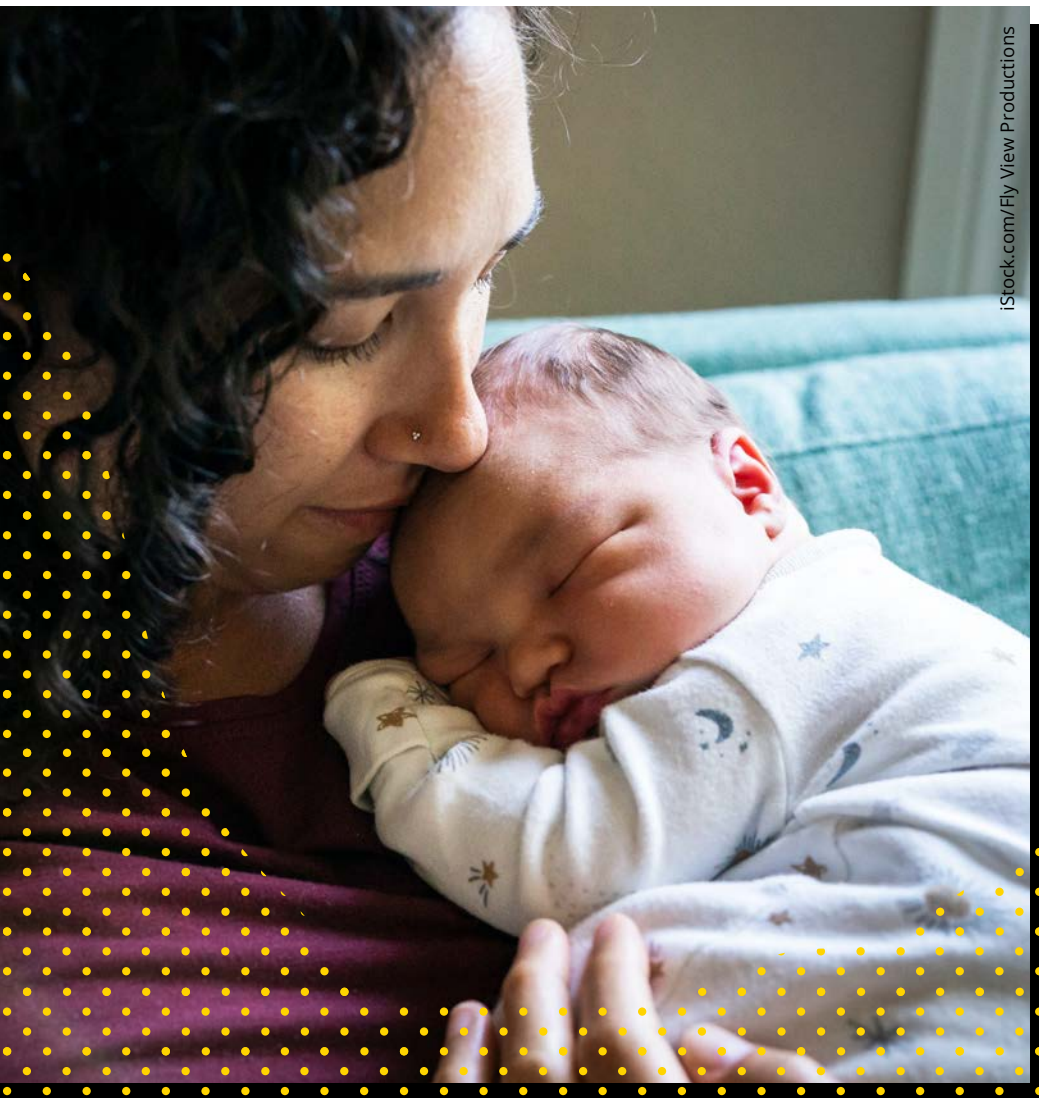
It would be helpful to view the child's behavior as experimentation and exploring their own body. It is important to show children the right framework in which they can pursue their own sexual development without shaming or punishing them. The message to the child should be that it's okay to touch yourself, but not in public where it can be uncomfortable for others. This is also a good opportunity to talk about boundaries – those of the child and those of others.

Parents are role models. Children observe very closely what they model for them, how they deal with feelings, how they form relationships, what they laugh about and what makes them sad.

**Are children nowadays more interested in the topic of sexuality than they used to be?**

Interest has not increased, but it is perhaps expressed more openly or in a less inhibited manner than in the past, when sexuality was more taboo. When adults show more openness, children tend to approach them more often on the subject of sexuality. And that's a good thing. This gives adults the opportunity to support the children's development and to discuss the topics that are currently on their minds in a developmentally appropriate way.

1 TO 3 YEARS OF AGE



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BABIES EXPERIENCE THE WORLD WITH ALL THEIR SENSES

When a baby is born, they can feel, taste, smell, hear and see right from the start. However, not all senses are equally developed. In the first few months of life, for example, babies cannot yet see very well – but their mouth, nose and skin are all the more sensitive. Babies use their mouths to suck on the breast or bottle, and they often continue to suck their thumb or pacifier contentedly even when they are full, simply for the comforting feeling. The mouth is the most important sensory organ in the first year of life. It is how babies perceive their environment. So don't be surprised if your child puts almost everything it sees in their mouth.

BABIES NEED PHYSICAL CONTACT

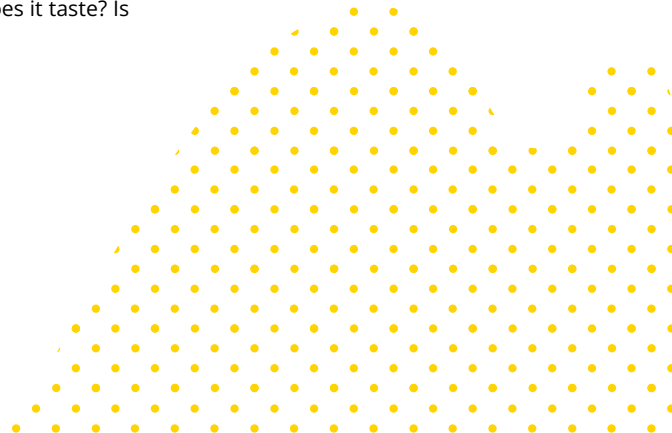
Babies like to be held and carried. They enjoy the extensive physical contact. All these sensory experiences are important for your child's physical, mental and emotional development, as they learn something new with every stimulus and every touch. Various studies on babies born prematurely also show how important such "cuddling sessions" are for small children: If they were lovingly stroked or massaged and allowed to enjoy physical contact with their parents, they gained weight faster and performed better in developmental tests.

YOUR VOICE CREATES A SENSE OF SECURITY

A wide variety of noises and sounds accompany the baby in their development from the very beginning. You should therefore talk to your child or sing to them, even if they can't understand you yet. When the baby hears your voice, they know that you are there and feel safe.

TOUCHING AND FEELING MEANS EXPERIENCING

Around the fifth month, you will notice that your child is increasingly able to intentionally reach for certain things. There is no fundamental difference here whether it is their leg, their own genitals or their onesie. They explore their whole body without inhibitions. Everything is equally interesting. In general, whether it's a cuddly toy, a grasping ring or their own fingers, almost everything a baby can get hold of, they first put in their mouth to get more detailed information. How does it taste? Is it hard or soft? Cold or warm?



THE FIRST CONSCIOUS SMILE – AND THE FIRST RELATIONSHIPS

Newborns try to make contact with their caregivers right from the start. They hear best in the frequency range of the human voice and become particularly attentive when they hear familiar voices – i.e. those of you as parents. After just a few days, they also recognize their parents by smell and can sense whether certain areas of skin – for example the chest, neck or shoulders – are familiar to them or not. They react to familiar people with glances, sounds or increased attention. Between six and ten weeks, many children also start consciously smiling at people. This enables them to establish a "relationship" with another person on their own initiative and begin an initial interaction.

MOVEMENT AND AFFECTION

Step by step, the child discovers the world and expands their scope of action and play. In the first year of life, babies also begin to move around on their own. They usually learn to crawl by the time they are about nine months old, before they then finally learn to walk on their own at around one year old. This is an important step, because now your child can decide for themselves whether they want to move towards something or someone or whether they would rather move away from it.

Through tender and attentive care, even young children learn to perceive their own bodies as valuable.



CHILDREN NEED BONDING

Around the time between the ninth and 13th month, young children increasingly show how important their parents or other trusted persons are to them. In new or frightening situations, for example, they may now not leave their mother or father's side or even cry in order to stay close to their parents. This innate "bonding behavior" shows how important it is to establish a good and, above all, reliable parent-child relationship in the first year of life. At the same time, it is an important developmental step and satisfies the child's need for closeness, protection and security.

IMPORTANT FOR REST OF THE CHILD'S LIFE: A GOOD PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

A strong and secure bond with parents or other loving and reliable caregivers is the best starting point for young children to discover their environment and master their lives. Early experiences shape children's development and have an influence on their ability to build and maintain relationships later in life.

It is now known that the ability to love and form relationships is learned in the early parent-child relationship. A good bond with mother and father gives children a kind of "basic trust" and therefore promotes positive child development right from the start.

Deep looks, loving words and being there for the child: All of this gives your child a feeling of security and reliability and promotes the development of your child.

**PARENT QUESTION**

"Can I spoil my child too much with attention?"

No. Parents cannot give too much loving care or tenderness to an infant, toddler or older child. However, it is important to respect the child's need for peace and quiet and any gestures of rejection. If babies or toddlers turn away or start crying, this is usually a sign that they need to be allowed some peace. Perhaps the child is tired or wants to play by themselves. Young children also have a right to this. This is the first attempt by your child to set boundaries and stand up for their needs.



EXPERIENCES OF THE SENSES

Besides the great joy and the sometimes very exhausting days and nights, when parents talk about contact with their babies, there are two main topics: breastfeeding and body care or changing diapers!

Especially when breastfeeding or bottle feeding and during body care, babies have many sensory experiences that have a positive influence on their development and their trust in the world – parents play a large part in this.

FEEDING AND SUCKING: A SENSUAL PLEASURE

The baby's mouth is particularly well equipped for the first intensive physical experiences: with strong muscles for sucking and lots of sensors for feeling. Feeding and sucking on the mother's breast or bottle gives the baby a pleasant feeling. It is also a nice feeling to be full and to feel the safety of having a parent or other caregiver there. The positive experiences associated with this are also transferred to other objects, for example their pacifier, their own fingers or a cuddle cloth.

BEING NAKED IS WONDERFUL!

You have probably already noticed how much babies enjoy being naked. At last, they can move around freely, kick to their heart's content or stretch their legs in the air. Without the restrictions of diapers, bodysuits and rompers, babies feel their bodies much more intensely. This can make changing diapers a good opportunity for physical experiences and tenderness. An early appreciative interaction with the body supports your child's development. The more your child develops, the greater their need to explore their own body with their hands. That's another reason why being naked is wonderful.



Many parents experience the physical contact when breast-feeding or bottle feeding as particularly pleasant. These experiences have a positive effect on both the parent-child relationship and the baby's emotional development. A calm and relaxed atmosphere is helpful.

PARENT QUESTION

"My young son (1) had an erection. Is that normal?"

Spontaneous erections in babies are nothing unusual. They occur in many children in different situations – for example, when they are relaxed or when they are upset about something. They have nothing to do with eroticism.



“SHOW ME” – “LOOK HERE”

WHEN CHILDREN CONQUER THE WORLD

As soon as your child begins to speak, takes their first steps or pulls themselves up on the edge of the table, they gain a new perspective on the world around them.

YOUR CHILD DISCOVERS NEW THINGS EVERY DAY AS THEY GET OLDER

Objects, other people, feelings. Your child is now constantly discovering something new that captures their interest. They now also explore and understand their own body in a new way. Children, regardless of gender, start to take an interest in their private parts. What exactly they explore and how intensively they do it varies greatly. The focus of children's curiosity is initially on understanding and classifying their own genitals. How do they feel? And what can I do with them anyway? This is not about an orgasm!

NICE FEELINGS AND PHYSICAL CURIOSITY

Young children often play around lost in thought and simply enjoy the nice feeling, sometimes also the pleasant calming and relaxation. It is part of your child's normal development to be curious, explore their own body and make it their own. Children even show their first sexual impulses in the womb and in the first few months after birth. Young boys have been known to get erections in various situations – for example, when sleeping, breastfeeding or even when tense. There are major individual differences in terms of frequency. Physical reactions in young girls are less well documented because they are more difficult to observe.



A child's curiosity about their own body and the nice feelings associated with it have a completely different quality to that of adults, who strive for an orgasm during masturbation.

PARENT QUESTION

"My child is intersex. Which gender should I raise them as?"

It is not necessary for your newborn baby to be assigned to a gender. As with any child, you can focus on making them feel safe and secure and creating an environment that provides stimulation for their development. Support your child in finding their own gender identity when they are older. Doctors advise against early surgery unless there is a medical indication. If genital surgery is performed on a newborn, it is impossible to predict what physical and psychological consequences this may have for your child. They may have to take medication for the rest of their life or may experience conflicts with their own identity. Apart from this, operations can also be experienced as traumatic during this phase. Such a step must be considered carefully and discussed with the child and experts in the course of development. What is important is that you as parents and caregivers are there for the child and to answer their questions and support them in finding their own path. If you have any further questions, there are also interest groups that can give you more detailed advice (see notes).



"Can children touch their parents' genitals in their curiosity?"

At around the age of two, some children also start to show an interest in adults' genitals. This interest is not sexually motivated, but merely an expression of a child's curiosity. For example, the children watch their mother and father get dressed in the morning or perhaps go into the bath together with one of the parents. This behavior of children wanting to discover new things can unsettle adults.

What to do? These situations are a good opportunity to teach the child about boundaries. The child can also learn to respect the intimacy of other people.

It is important that you teach your child that simply touching another person's private parts is crossing a boundary. You can communicate in a calm and loving way that you do not like to be "examined" in this way. Because when children sense that their parents are suppressing their own sense of shame for their sake, they learn that it's okay to tolerate touch that makes you uncomfortable. It's better to say: "I don't want that." Even younger children understand this and they learn something very important: that everyone has the right to protect their intimacy and say "no." This way, your child can learn that it is okay to set boundaries and that these must be respected.

PARENT QUESTION

"I'M A GIRL!" – "I'M A BOY!"

As early as the second year of life, children begin to understand that there are different genders and that girls or women and boys or men are often differentiated on the basis of certain characteristics. However, children of this age often differentiate on the basis of hair and clothing rather than gender characteristics. This shows the effect of role models and gender roles on children. They adopt social attributions, but these differ depending on the family, cultural or religious environment and the respective norms. Just ask yourself: What gender attributions do I perhaps unconsciously convey myself? As parents and role models, you can support your child's development by providing them with different experiences without using clichés. Take the opportunity to offer your child a wide range of development opportunities. For example, you can introduce various activities and games involving movement and/or music, from which they can choose freely – regardless of classifications such as "for girls" or "for boys." There are also activities available for very young children, such as baby swimming. These are important experiences and the first building blocks in the development of one's own personality. This also applies to the choice of toys and clothing. Social norms and rituals also play a role here. You might find it interesting to ask yourself: What is it like at home and what do I want to encourage in my child?

CHILDREN ASK LOTS OF QUESTIONS

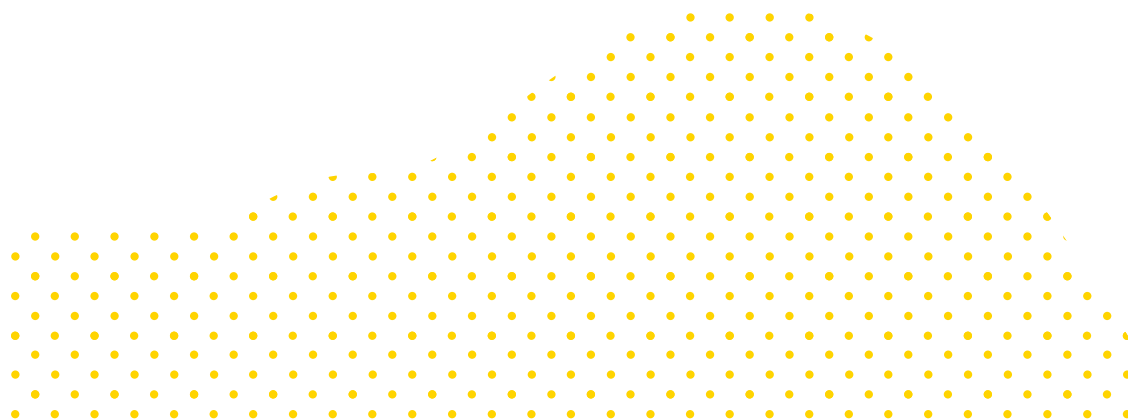
As children become increasingly interested in their own gender, they make new and exciting discoveries which – like many other experiences – they are keen to share with their parents (and possibly other trusted caregivers). Little boys might now proudly show off their penis and try to imitate the upright posture of men when urinating. Little girls sometimes lift their skirts proudly to show off their vulvas. Here it is important that you teach your child where and when this behavior is okay and where it is not.

Some boys may now want to know whether a baby will grow in their belly or whether they will have breasts. Some girls may be interested in whether they can still grow a penis. This is also part of the increasing mental preoccupation with one's own gender. Parents can answer their son, for example: “No, you're a boy, and when you grow up, you'll be a man. Men don't have breasts and babies don't grow in their bellies. They only grow in women's bellies.” You can tell your daughter and son: “Girls are born with a vagina, boys with a penis. In boys, the penis is on the outside of the body. Girls have more inside their bodies.”

All these questions are completely normal and a sign that the children have the confidence and trust in you to ask you these questions. They are part of a child's curiosity and development. And every honest question from your child deserves an honest, age-appropriate answer from you.

FEEL FREE TO CALL THE GENITALS BY THEIR NAMES

Children need words for the genitals and the various excretory processes. They need words for all parts of the body. This helps them to get to know and accept their own bodies. At this age, it doesn't matter whether you choose childish names or the correct anatomical terms. It is important that these are not derogatory expressions. Children should know and be able to name the genitals. It's best to use words that don't just refer to the whole abdomen with belly or bottom, but more precise terms. Later on, it is helpful if your child not only knows the colloquial “kiddy” terms, but also the correct terms. This will enable them to make themselves clearly understood to others, for example in kindergarten and at school. It also teaches children that it is okay to talk about their genitals and that they are not a taboo subject.



INTERVIEW

ALL PEOPLE HAVE BOUNDARIES

The experiences of openness, but also of shame and boundaries, play a central role in the family and in children's sexual development. Why?

An interview with Bettina Schuhrke, Professor of Psychology at the Evangelische Fachhochschule Darmstadt, University of Applied Sciences. Prof. Schuhrke has researched body shame in children in several studies.

Do we humans need a sense of shame at all?

Absolutely! This is because it signals whether boundaries have been transgressed in human interaction. Shame is used to mark one's own boundaries, but also the boundaries of others. When we surprise a stranger in the bathroom because they have forgotten to lock the door, they are usually embarrassed – and so are we.

So children learn to set boundaries thanks to this feeling?

Correct. The feeling of shame is what makes the development of a personal sphere possible in the first place. Shame is the guardian of privacy, so to speak.

When do children develop their first feelings of shame?

Babies do not yet have a sense of shame, because shame is a very complex emotion. This means that certain mental requirements must first develop in order to be able to feel and perceive something like shame or related feelings such as embarrassment or awkwardness.

What is the most important requirement?

Self-awareness – the child must have an awareness of themselves as an independent person. They then gradually learn that they are judged by others on their behavior and which rules apply for correct behavior in social interaction. Incidentally, there is not only physical shame, but people also feel ashamed if they have not done something well, for example. Our studies specifically on body shame have shown that it does not start at the same age in all children. Some children show the first signs of embarrassment as early as the age of two, but parents often observe this from the age of three. And at the age of six, most people have the capacity for body shame.

What role do parents play in the development of feelings of shame?

Parents set rules and boundaries within the family and also externally – their own feelings and sensibilities often compel them to do this. The two-year-old son really wants to go to the bathroom with mom when she needs to. Or the three-year-old daughter, who has always been so well-behaved when bathing with dad, suddenly discovers how fun it is to pour cold water on his penis.

So parents sometimes reach their own boundaries?

Correct. One father may take the cold water with good spirit, another might want to jump out of the bathtub immediately. Body shame is a very personal matter – for children and adults. In our study, we found that the rules of shame in families differ. For example, when going to the bathroom. Fathers and older siblings are often less tolerant than mothers. They simply lock the door behind them. Mothers tend to tolerate children accompanying them to the bathroom, but only when going for a “number 1” in most cases.

In this way, every child learns within their family that there are different levels of tolerance and different boundaries and that everyone has their own privacy.

Correct. But above all, there is a large area of agreement in every society, otherwise we would be constantly violating each other's boundaries. However, some rules of shame are complicated and difficult for children to understand. In most cases, rules are not explicitly discussed, but are part of seemingly self-evident everyday behavior, such as getting dressed in the morning. Children observe closely what their father and mother, siblings, grandparents or peers do as role models. So the parents are not alone.

Children should learn that discovering their own body and playing with it – whether alone or with children of the same age – is not something you do in public, but something private. You can explain to small children that there is a space for every activity: the kitchen for cooking, the bathroom for washing – and the nursery for exploring their bodies undisturbed, for example.

Can “too much” shame in the family have a negative impact?

Yes, children should learn boundaries, but they should not grow to have a negative view of their bodies. Our studies show that children very quickly learn to distinguish between a trusted, familiar person and a stranger and differentiate between them. In many families today, it is okay to see each other naked until puberty. But as I said, there are differences! Not talking about the body and sexuality at home at all is problematic. Perhaps the children then experience their private parts as something they are not allowed to talk about. This of course makes any kind of sex education difficult, which is very important in today's sexually influenced environment.

PARENT QUESTION

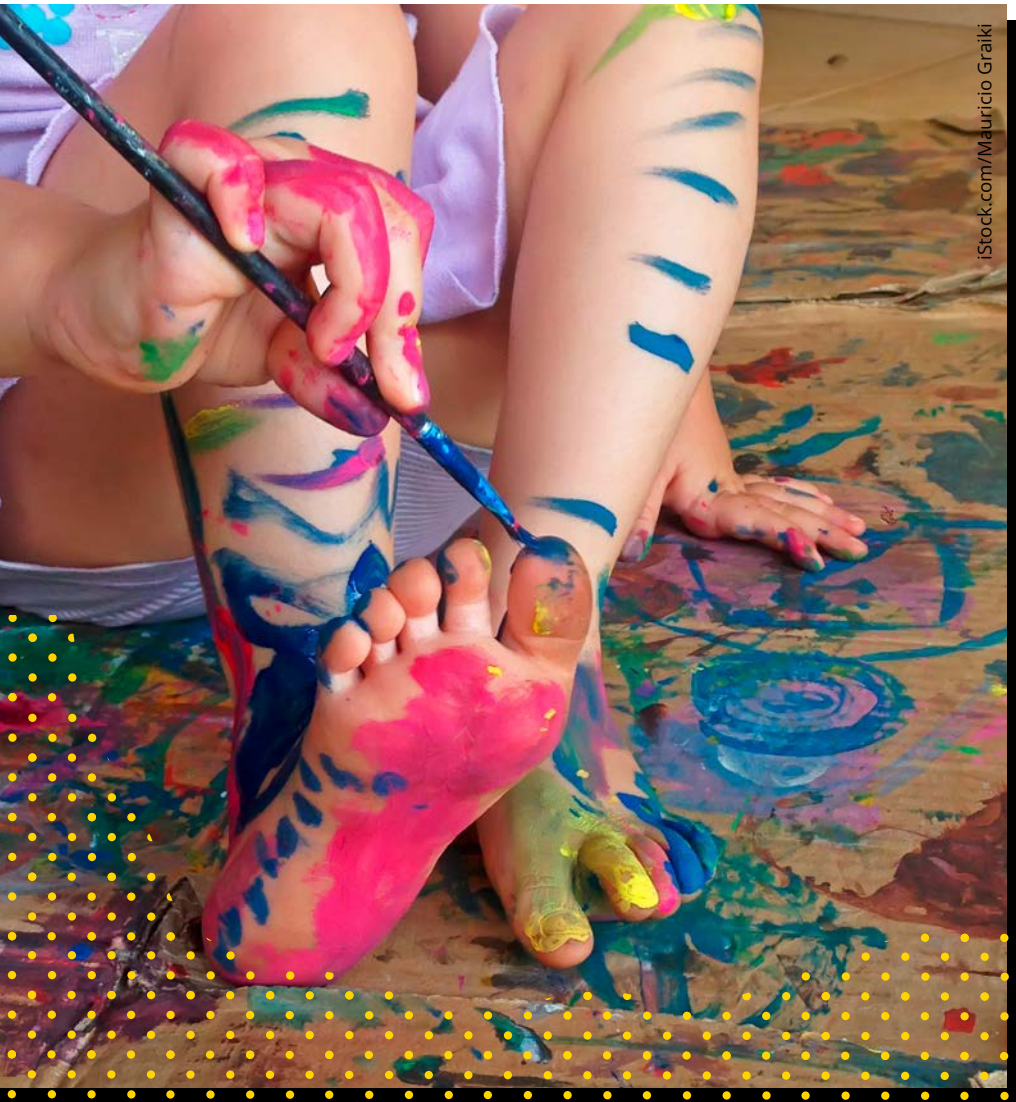


"Caught having sex – is that bad?"

No. Sometimes children surprise their parents during sex. In most cases, they do not perceive this situation as such an exceptional situation as the adults caught in the act.

Your child may be curious or unsure because they have heard loud moaning and are thinking of pain or are frightened by the violent movements they have seen. It is then helpful to explain to the child that adults are sometimes just as loud as romping children when cuddling or having sex. Under no circumstances should parents actually try to ensure that the children notice. Parents' sexuality is their private matter and should not take place in the presence of their children.

Children learn that their parents also have a private sphere – and the right to protect it. When your child is a little older and better able to understand, you may also be able to teach them what it means when the door to a room is closed – that someone wants to be left alone and that you knock before you open the door. This rule naturally applies to both the child's rooms as well as the parents' room.



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PLAYING, ASKING QUESTIONS, **TRYING THINGS OUT**

Children between the ages of two and three really enjoy experimenting. What happens if I mix up all the finger paints? Can I also walk in my mom's high heels? How do the buttons on the washing machine work? Many children ask one question after the next, become more independent step by step, want to do as much as possible on their own – and increasingly develop a will of their own.

A LITTLE DEFIANCE IS PART OF THE PACKAGE

This is the stage when parents get their first experiences with defiance. More and more often, your child wants to assert their own wishes and ideas instead of listening to the boring instructions of adults. Now your child is gaining their first important experiences with self-assertion: Are the child's ideas, wishes and needs heard and taken into account by the parents? Children who learn now that their views are taken seriously – even if not everything is allowed – will find it easier later to express their own needs to other people, for example when forming relationships later in life.

DEFIANCE IS IMPORTANT FOR DEVELOPMENT

Because a child who is allowed to be defiant has learned something very important at the end of this stressful time: That they are an independent person with their own will who has a right to trust their own feelings. A person who also has to be considerate, but who can and is allowed to assert themselves and set boundaries when it matters. A person who is loved by their parents, even if they have a different opinion.

POTTY TRAINING: EVERY CHILD “CHOOSES” THE RIGHT TIME TO START

You will be doing your child a great favor by being patient when potty training them and avoid forcing them as much as possible. Studies have shown that practicing going to the toilet has no influence on the timing of becoming potty trained. Children must first meet certain requirements before they can go to the potty or toilet on time on their own. They need to understand that the feeling of pressure in the abdomen or on the bladder is related to their excretions. And they need a sense of time to be able to estimate whether they will make it to the potty or the toilet in time. They must also be able to control their bowel and bladder muscles as well as their sphincter muscles. It is easier for children to learn to control their bowel movements at first, as the signals preceding a bowel movement are clearer. The most difficult thing is to control urination at night.

Every child has their own timetable for all developmental steps – including the voluntary control of number 1s and number 2s. This can be at 18 or 24 months, but also at 36 months. By four to five years at the latest, most children will no longer need a diaper.

GIRLS AND BOYS ARE PROUD WHEN THEY KNOW THEIR BODIES WELL

Between the ages of two and three, when their interest in their own excretions grows, many children are visibly proud that they now know their bodies so well. That's why they like to show off the products of their new “skill.” Perhaps you as a mother or father can even share the child's pride for a moment and not immediately flush away the child's “business.” Children find their own excrement very exciting.

CHILDREN WANT TO BE BIG AND STRONG!

Around the age of three, sometimes a little earlier or later, children's urge to explore and move around increases significantly: They want to be big and strong and move away from their parents more often and with more confidence. They also meet other children and adults more often and learn new rules in kindergarten, among other things. Your child is taking another big developmental step: They become more autonomous and independent. This is part of normal development. On the other hand, they may react to the many new experiences with previously unseen caution or even anxiety. Some children may need the special attention, security and care of their parents once again during this time. As parents, you can support your child by being there for them so that they feel safe, while at the same time giving them enough freedom to try things out and feel strong.



Children have the right to say “yes” or “no.” This is also an important requirement for the prevention of sexual abuse.

In playgroup or kindergarten, your child forms their own friendships and gradually learns to observe social rules when interacting with others. They learn that it is important to show consideration for others – or to assert themselves. All the skills that the child acquires now, in addition to the tenderness, care, acceptance, responsibility and respect that they have experienced at home, are an important basis for their later attitude to life in relationships.

CHILDREN'S FEELINGS: "AND WHEN WE GROW UP, WE'LL GET MARRIED..."

Your child's emotional development is now so advanced that they can feel and express deep affection for a girl or boy their own age. Some of these childhood relationships are very intense and loving: Then the child only wants to be with their boyfriend/girlfriend and be as close to him or her as possible – even physically. Such intimate friendships can be of the same or opposite sex. The couples in question often announce that they want to get married when they grow up. In this way, children express what they have seen or learned from adults: If they want to marry their kindergarten boyfriend/girlfriend, they are showing how close their relationship is. Now it is important that parents recognize and understand these childish feelings without judging or devaluing them.



Children have a need to discover their bodies and their feelings. And they want to feel that their feelings are really respected.

4 TO 6 YEARS OF AGE



Tomas Rodriguez/Corbis via Getty Images

CHILDREN NEED FRIENDS

TO PLAY WITH, SHARE EXPERIENCES AND FALL IN LOVE WITH

At the age of four to five, your child's physical and mental development is so advanced that their interest in their own and the opposite sex reaches a new level. The child can now tell stories, make up different scenarios, act them out alone or with friends and act out different everyday situations. Now children want to try out how gender roles play out in everyday life and in social behavior. Role models are usually their parents or other adults from their environment, sometimes also older siblings or their friends.

ROLE PLAYING IS FUN – AND PROMOTES DEVELOPMENT

Whether they are playing shopping, building site, “doctors” or father-mother-child: Children like to act out what was particularly nice, exciting or bad for them. By play-acting and imitating, they come into contact with each other and learn to put themselves in other people’s shoes. This allows children to experience different situations from different perspectives. They can try out how to achieve something and when they reach their limits – or those of others. This also includes dealing with conflicts and solving problems together. They learn different rules for living together and can try out the consequences of these rules. These are important steps towards better understanding social interaction and developing social skills.

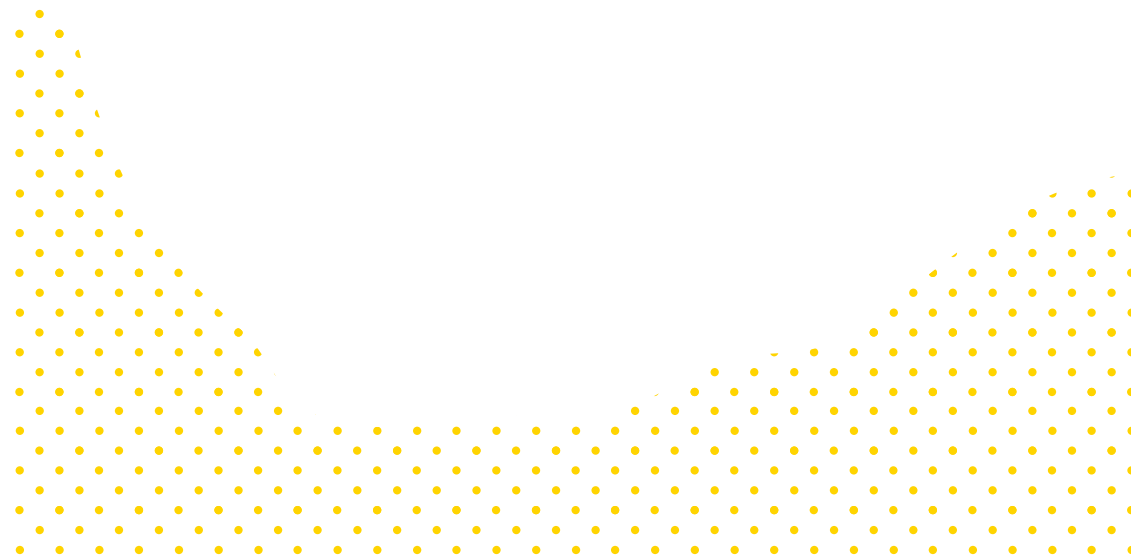
“PLAYING DOCTORS” – CHILDREN CHOOSE THEIR PLAYMATES CAREFULLY

The new interest in others also has a physical dimension. Curiosity about one’s own body and that of others is part of normal child development.

Many children of this age find it exciting to “play doctors” in order to observe and examine other children closely. In this phase, “playing doctors” corresponds to age-appropriate exploratory behavior. After all, visits to the doctor for childhood illnesses or check-ups are an important and regular experience for them. With the “doctor’s bag,” a classic in the range of the most popular toys for decades, children act out what they have experienced during a visit to the doctor’s office. They listen to each other heartbeat, give each other an “injection” or “medicine.”

Sometimes the mutual “examinations” become more thorough. Children take off their pants and also want to examine their genital area. The door to the children’s room or quiet room closes and it is unusually quiet for a while. This sometimes unsettles adults. You can rest easy and let them play their doctor games, because they are an expression of a child’s natural curiosity. At the same time, it is important that you tell the children to be careful with each other and not to put any objects in their orifices. Adults should only intervene if they notice that a child’s boundaries are being overstepped and, for example, an older child is persuading a younger one to play or is taking advantage of them, or a child is playing against their will or there is otherwise an imbalance, e.g. due to their role in the group.

As a rule, children deliberately choose suitable playmates and friends with whom they want to have these experiences. The selection is based on trust and friendship. This is the same for all children. Some of them may only have the opportunity to compare and play with many different children in kindergarten.





"How much tenderness among children is 'normal'?"

Tenderness between children is usually an expression of an intense friendship. Between the ages of four and six, girls can be very close friends with boys, but also girls with girls or boys with boys. The two usually want to be as close as possible, hugging or stroking each other. Maybe they also try out what it's like to kiss for a long time in the game. Just as they have seen adults do. This is perfectly normal for children in this age group. Same-sex kissing in this phase is not an indication of sexual orientation in adulthood.

PARENT QUESTION



Whether deep affection, jealousy or curiosity, children should not be afraid to show their feelings or ask questions in everyday family life. It helps children in their development if parents are always attentive to their questions and use loving gestures to show them what closeness and trust mean.

Your child may then ask you lots of questions. You may sometimes be a bit taken aback and won't immediately have the right answer. That's fine. Try to answer simply and honestly. It could be helpful here to use language that is appropriate for the child's phase of development.

Once the children have examined, applied cream to, listened to, looked at or touched each other often enough and become familiar with different parts of the body, other games usually become more interesting again – playing doctors loses its fascination.

"BIG FEELINGS"

Around the age of three to five, many girls discover their special love for their father and many boys discover their love for their mother. "When I grow up, I'll marry you!" – this is how children express how much they love mom or dad and how important he or she is to them. Some children are now also very jealous of the other parent and find that he or she is actually in the way of their time together with their beloved mother or father.

If such behavior confuses you, it is important to remember that your daughter or son is not behaving like this on purpose. They are trying things out in a protected environment. Try meeting these first strong childish feelings with love and understanding if possible.

Sometimes it's not so easy to deal with your child's intense feelings with understanding. Perhaps they are now showing their deep affection particularly strongly and only want to be with you and sleep in bed with you all the time. However, they may also turn to another trusted caregiver and shower them with their childish displays of affection. The reasons for this can be very different. Parents may want to reflect on their own behavior to check to see whether they are perhaps unconsciously sending signals that the child should spend the night with them. It can also be helpful to talk to the child about why they are so being clingy. Perhaps they are afraid of ghosts that have to be driven away before they can sleep. Parents can do this together with their children before bedtime. However, in order for children to develop physical independence, they also need distance from adults and should also be encouraged to fall asleep in their own bed.

PARENT QUESTION



"My son, 4 years old, loves putting on dresses and make-up. Should I be concerned that he'd rather be a girl?"

No. Between the ages of four and six, young children deal with the topic of gender and the associated behavior in a variety of ways. They watch the adults and older siblings or other children around them closely or enthusiastically act out what they have seen on TV or in picture books. Sometimes it may seem exaggerated. It helps the children to better empathize with the role and to feel it more clearly in the exaggeration.

These role-playing games can involve different genders and allow children to enjoy their first taste of adulthood. When children experiment with a gender behavior that does not correspond to their own biological sex, this is sometimes viewed with suspicion, especially for boys. Even if it may be difficult for you, let your son play his exciting game, allow him to have fun with lipstick, red painted fingernails and a dress or skirt. This experimentation does not necessarily say anything about later sexual orientation or gender identity.

INTERVIEW

LANGUAGE IS THE BEST REMEDY WHEN LOST FOR WORDS

Even if parents may find it difficult to talk to their children about sexuality, it is supportive for children's development.

An interview with Maria Kube, former Director of the Sozialdienst Katholischer Frauen e. V. (Catholic Women's Welfare Service) in Münster. The sexual education team at the Sozialdienst deals with the topic of child sexual development and its promotion by parents and educators in various areas.

Should the topic of "sexuality" really be discussed at kindergarten age?

In our opinion, everything that people deal with also belongs in a child's world – from birth to death. I don't believe in excluding certain topics. Of course, you have to talk to the children in an age-appropriate manner, but this applies to all topics. Let's take "healthy eating": I'm not going to avoid talking about such an important part of everyday life with my child just because they don't cook for themselves yet! It's similar with sexuality.

Are children dependent on their parents' loving attention?

Absolutely. They need closeness, affection and tenderness, otherwise they feel bad. It is important for physical and mental development that children learn from their parents to perceive and enjoy their own bodies with all their senses – for example, by being tickled from head to toe and thus experiencing the pleasurable joy of it together with mom or dad. In this context, it is also very important that parents find loving words for all parts of their daughter's or son's body, for the genitals as well as for cuddling. Babies and small children "experience" their bodies long before they learn to speak.

Does talking about sexuality make children sexually active at an earlier age?

No! When a motorsport enthusiast father takes his three-year-old son to the Nürburgring, we don't assume that the little one will grab the car keys at the next best opportunity he gets and speed off in his dad's car. It's more about giving children important experiences through language and satisfying their curiosity. Child sexuality cannot be compared with adult sexuality, as adult sexuality is essentially focused on genitality. Active children do pursue their curiosity and enjoy their positive body image, but do not start having sex earlier because of this.

So childlike curiosity is looking for stimulation and answers?

When a little girl realizes: "Oh! I look completely different between my legs than the boy next door, there's something dangling there that I don't have, and I'd really like to take a closer look at it..." then that has nothing to do with sexual activity in the adult sense. The important thing for the children in this situation is to get to the bottom of their observations. And to know or learn words so that they can really understand the differences between girls and boys.

I think parents have a responsibility towards their children. This also includes correctly recognizing children's curiosity for what it is.

At pre-school age, children should know terms for their feelings, their bodies and their genitals that are generally understandable. And they should have age-appropriate knowledge about conception, pregnancy and birth. This gives them security and self-confidence.



What if a child doesn't ask any questions?

That also happens. Children are different – some are inquisitive and ask lots of questions, others are rather quiet but have a great need for affection, others like to romp around. In their own way, each child gains learning and physical experiences that are important for sexual development. Like all parents, parents of quieter children, who don't ask questions, have a responsibility. Assuming this responsibility means creating stimuli for conversations, not withdrawing, and respecting the children's boundaries. Although talking too much is not immediately harmful, it is important to be sensitive and take the child's needs into consideration.

And what if parents find it difficult to talk to their child about sexuality?

Parents don't have to master this perfectly immediately when their child is born, but can grow into their role bit by bit. Until your child is an adult, you will constantly encounter new topics that you will have to tackle. I would like to encourage all parents not to leave their children in the dark when it comes to such important topics as their own bodies, sensuality, pleasure and sexuality. Children's questions that are not answered leave room for disturbing fantasies and fears. If a child cannot talk to their parents about their "sexual" questions, experiences or observations, they cannot develop the proper language, and over time, become unable to speak on this topic. That is not good. Because if a child is feeling bad – for whatever reason – they cannot express what they are going through.



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EXPLAINING THINGS – BUT HOW?

Sex education takes place in every family – whether consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally. Avoiding the topic is also a form of sex education. What characterizes sex-positive education today?

Sexuality as a positive life energy accompanies us throughout our lives: from development during pregnancy to old age. The diverse sensual and physical experiences, especially in the first years of life, influence your child's well-being and affect partnership and sexual behavior into adulthood.

SEX EDUCATION IS MORE THAN “JUST” SEX EDUCATION

The younger children are, the less they learn cognitively, i.e. with their “head.” For younger children, lived physical experiences and role models are therefore particularly important. This means that it is important for them to learn together with their parents – whether by playing together or reading books.

Children discover their bodies through play and they love games of all kinds. In addition to the need to learn together, children also have a desire for intimacy and boundaries as they get older. They also try this out in relationships and in play with their peers.

Sex-positive education is therefore much more than mere information and explanations. Nor does it take place selectively or as a one-off. Rather, it is a fundamental attitude in everyday communication.

DISABILITIES AND EDUCATION

In principle, children with a disability experience their own development and the associated changes in the same way as their peers without a disability. In some areas, however, the changes can also cause more difficulties for children with disabilities, especially if these are mental disabilities. If this is the case, there can be a big difference between the mental and physical level of development. It can be more difficult for children with mental disabilities to cope with and process the physical changes, and this can cause anxiety and insecurity.

In order to alleviate these fears, it is important that parents explain the development and the associated changes to the child and make them understand that changes are normal. In this way, the child can develop a confident relationship with their body.

Children compare themselves with each other. This makes children with disabilities aware that they are different – or that they can't do everything. This realization can be accompanied by grief and anger, for which it can be difficult to find words – both for the children and possibly also for the parents.

For all children, the question or desire to be “normal” plays a major role throughout the entire development process. These questions and wishes should be answered and responded to honestly and trustfully.

It is important to explain to your child the physical and associated psychological changes in good time.

SEXUALITY AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

As personal and different as the approach to sexuality and sex education can be in different families, kindergartens and schools, the customs, traditions and values in other cultures are just as different. What is normal for some people may be perceived by others as a transgression or excessively reserved.

Regardless of whether you and/or your children were born in Germany or have immigrated from another country, it is a good idea to raise any questions or concerns you may have. You may find certain behaviors or statements incomprehensible, strange or foreign. Then you can ask, for example, how exactly something is meant, what it means or how it should be understood.



Sex education is a child's right and is of great importance for all children.



Talking about sexuality with other parents is not easy, and one person's way of doing things may be alien to another or offend their own values or religious sensibilities. Express this concern instead of remaining silent – you are certainly not alone.

TALKING HELPS

Talking to each other and sharing personal experiences is good for both children and parents. Because it creates a positive atmosphere that supports children in their learning and development. However, it is unusual or even taboo for people from some cultures to talk openly about sexuality, especially with people outside the family. Perhaps the topic of sex education can also be discussed at a parents' evening in the daycare center together with the other parents and the staff. This can reduce uncertainty, create clarity and promote the exchange of experiences. Because all parents have one thing in common: Their children's honest questions always deserve an honest answer appropriate for their stage of development.

If children go to the swimming pool together, for example, a five-year-old boy may notice that his penis looks different from his friend's – and he may ask his parents why this is. Younger children in particular still discover differences in appearance completely openly and without any "ulterior motives." Parents can then explain that every penis looks different and that this is normal. Sometimes the topic of circumcision might come up in conversation, for example because a boy in the group has just experienced it. The accompanying adults can pick up on this and explain, for example, that there may be medical, religious or cultural reasons for this.

PARENT QUESTION



"How does the baby get into the belly?"

If children already know that babies grow in their mother's belly, at some point they will also want to know how the babies get into the belly. Then parents can say, for example: "The baby grows in the belly." Depending on their stage of development, children may then ask further questions and expect explanations. Then the parents can explain, for example, that when a woman and a man love each other, they want to be very close to each other. If it is very nice and they both want it, the man's stiff penis can slide into the woman's wet vagina. This can result in a baby.

Sometimes children find that funny or "ewww" – that's normal too. You can respond to your child's feelings or reaction by saying, for example: "I can understand why you find that funny. I felt the same way when I was your age."



Parents should use the opportunities and possibilities of proactive and loving sex education and not leave this area to the media. Try to pay attention to what your children are preoccupied with. If parents are attentive to their child, for example in regular conversations, they can pick up on their child's questions and support them with answers appropriate for their developmental stage. This way they can help their child understand what they see.

SEX AND MEDIA EDUCATION BELONG TOGETHER TODAY

Parents who do not explain things to their children leave this central task to others, because children always end up finding answers. Sex can already be a topic among children in the first grade today. Younger children play and learn with their peers in kindergarten or playgroup, they pick up on what their older siblings or older children are saying in the playground or on the street. And children are sensitive to suggestive remarks or jokes from adults.

Children encounter the topics of eroticism and sexuality outside the family in particular – whether on posters, on television, on the internet or on various social platforms such as YouTube, Instagram or TikTok. They catch a glimpse of cell phone screens or videos online. They see these images and the meanings associated with them, but often do not yet understand them.

MAKE YOURSELF MEDIA LITERATE

A child's image of sexuality is like a mosaic made up of many different impressions. To ensure that this mosaic does not only consist of images and impressions conveyed by the media, parents today should be media literate and also talk to their children about the use of media and the possible representations found there. This way, they can be sure that their children's experiences of sexuality, gender roles and lifestyles are not only fed by the media and the public thematization of sexuality. Parents have an important role to play here, right from the start, even at pre-school age.

AND CHILDREN LOVE BOOKS!

Because young children learn primarily through contact and relationships with their parents and trusted caregivers, reading books together is a good way to educate them. There are books that present the various topics relating to the body and sexuality in an age-appropriate way. When looking through them together, the child can ask questions at their own pace – and get answers.

Young children in particular need simple answers to their first questions. They don't want to hear any technical details or unnecessary facts about the act of conception or birth.



A helpful information site for parents on the subject of media is www.klicksafe.de



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GENDER ROLES: GIRL, BOY, WOMAN, MAN...

Between the ages of three and six, children start thinking about the different gender roles in a variety of ways. At home, they observe how the mother behaves or what the father does. Everything the child learns about the distribution of tasks and roles of women and men in their own household is combined with what they themselves learn about the behavior and feelings of a girl or boy. The child draws their conclusions from what they observe. If what they see does not correspond to traditional gender roles, the child can learn from an early age that there are different family structures and gender roles. For example, a child growing up in a blended family may have different experiences to a child living with a single mother or a same-sex couple.

TENDER OR WILD? BOTH ARE IMPORTANT

Various studies show that parents bring up girls and boys differently. For instance, many mothers and fathers do not cuddle their sons for as long as they do their daughters – and overlook the fact that both sexes are dependent on tenderness and affection far beyond infancy. Other studies have found that “wild” girls are much more likely to be restricted in their urge to romp around than boys – although the exuberant romping around provides both sexes with important physical experiences that have a positive effect on their further development.



Children benefit from getting to know and trying out as wide a variety of male and female behaviors as possible. In this way, they learn various skills from an early age.

Above all, girls need full recognition and appreciation from their parents as individuals, not just when they are “sweet” and “well-behaved.” Boys are often still taught to be strong, even though they are just as dependent on emotional and physical attention as girls. Boys are also allowed to be weak, afraid and accept comfort or help. Parents can teach them this by comforting them when they fall, for example.

MODERN FAMILY PUZZLE

It's not just gender roles that have become more flexible in recent decades – the family has also changed. Today, children and parents live in a wide variety of family forms: Mother and father live together with their children either in or out of wedlock, the children are brought up by only one parent and see the other parent regularly or they live with one of their parents in a blended family or stepfamily. Families with same-sex parents are also no longer such a novelty. What is crucial for children?

PARENT QUESTION

"I'm a single parent – is my child missing out on the opposite sex?"

Being a single parent is difficult and sometimes a stressful task. This becomes the case even more so as you feel you must take on the role of the missing partner. You don't have to and you can't. It is simply not possible to replace the child's missing mother or father, especially in view of the gender characteristics. Ideally, the mother and father should separate on good terms so that the other parent remains as present as possible for the child. If this is not possible, the single parent may find a good friend, siblings living nearby, their own parents or parents-in-law with whom the child can experience how adult women and men behave.

CHILDREN OBSERVE HOW ADULTS TREAT EACH OTHER

Adults can reflect on the example they set for their children: How do we deal with differences of opinion? How openly do we talk to each other? And how do we express our feelings? They can also become aware of their own needs for attention, recognition, cuddling and sexuality and ask themselves questions: How do we deal with this and how do we express our wishes? Parents should also make sure that the child does not take on the role of a substitute partner.

In many single-parent families and stepfamilies, a central question is how mothers or fathers with a new partner deal with the questions and needs of their children. How are they dealing with the new situation? Sometimes children keep their distance from the “newcomer” to the family and need a long time to build up trust. In newly formed families, it is important that closeness and tenderness or physical contact are built up slowly and carefully. Young children distinguish very clearly between familiar, trusted caregivers and less familiar caregivers.

DEVELOPING ONE'S OWN GENDER ROLE WITH EASE

It is always helpful for children to have different role models. They can learn a lot from them. This also applies to their own gender role. It is therefore important that children of single parents have different models in their own environment.

What parents should avoid as far as possible is devaluing the absent parent. Children love both parents. It is helpful for their growing self-confidence that the other parent is allowed recognition and is appreciated. By not denying or rejecting the relationship with their ex partner, mothers and father are supporting their child, as their child feels a sense of belonging to both parents.

The online family handbook (see notes) has a separate section under the menu item “Family life” which deals with many different aspects of everyday parenting in single-parent families or stepfamilies.

“STUPID GIRLS” – “STUPID BOYS”: DISTANCE IS NOW THE ORDER OF THE DAY

Towards the end of kindergarten, or at the latest at the beginning of elementary school, the time has come: Most girls and boys focus on their own gender and clearly set themselves apart. Sometimes this also happens by them waking up one day and declaring the other gender to be stupid. Suddenly, the invitation lists for the children's birthday party are completely rearranged, as there is sometimes a certain social pressure within the respective group – whether in kindergarten or at school – to behave in a role-conforming manner. This means, for example, not playing with a girl as a boy. Some children develop typical behaviors, which they sometimes put on display. This is a normal part of trying things out.

Some children cannot or do not want to be assigned to a particular gender. This can be confusing for parents. The children are looking for answers. During this time, they need their parents as a person of trust to whom they can turn. On the one hand, parents are a model for children to follow. At the same time, they help their children by acting as stable pillars against which the children can measure themselves and rub shoulders.

GIRL OR BOY – IS THAT CLEAR!?



Girl or boy? Many of us take this as a given; it's obvious, you can see it. But it's not always so clear-cut.

INTERSEX PEOPLE

There are people whose physical sexual characteristics cannot be clearly assigned as female or male. For example, they are born with a penis and a vagina or a vagina and testicles. These people are called intersex or inter. Intersex is not an illness; it's a form of expression of diversity, and it has always existed.

It is important to know that most intersex children are healthy and do not require medical or even surgical interventions. Some intersex people identify and feel as women, some as men. And some feel they are both or are between the sexes. In most cases, doctors determine at birth that the genitals cannot be clearly assigned to the male or female sex. However, some people only find out that they are intersex in the course of their lives.

PARENTS NO LONGER HAVE TO DECIDE ON GENDER

Since December 2014, parents no longer have to decide whether to have "boy" or "girl" entered on the birth certificate when a child with indeterminate sex characteristics is born. They could have left the corresponding field blank. However, this option was not applicable insofar as a person is not sexless. For this reason, a legal regulation was introduced in 2018 that makes it possible to register as "non-binary" ("diverse" in Germany). Since then, the following four options are possible: "female," "male," "non-binary" and "not specified." This means that intersex people can be better catered for than before.

Children whose physical sex characteristics cannot be clearly categorized as female or male develop just as individually as their peers for whom the classification appears to be clear. They identify as the gender to which they feel they belong.

IT'S FUN TO PROVOKE

Children get a lot of pleasure out of using crude swear words, idioms, jokes or sexual innuendos – whether at a family lunch or when their grandparents are visiting. What motivates children to tell rude jokes or call their brother “you jerkoff,” and not just once, but repeatedly and with increasing pleasure?

The answer is that it's exciting to say something forbidden – and it's fun to finally get the adults upset or embarrassed. Especially because children are usually in an inferior position. The most successful method of dealing with these provocations is to remain as calm as possible. Some kindergartens have set up a “swear room” where the children are allowed to shout as long and as loud as they want, and as many words as they can think of. And these have shown to be quite a success. Most verbal provocations then cease.

However, if a child uses rude language that you do not want to hear, you should talk to the child. They often don't know exactly what they are saying. Explain to them what these terms mean and how they can affect you and other people.

PARENT QUESTION

"My daughter, aged 4, told me that at kindergarten, Thomas and Lea (both 5) 'fucked' in the dolls' corner... How should I react to this?"

Take a deep breath – and stay calm. Be pleased that your child is telling you about their experiences at kindergarten in such an unbiased way. First of all, a few comments on the choice of words: You need to understand that your daughter (or son) has picked up the term somewhere. Ask in a friendly manner whether she (or he) knows what it means. And then explain to her (or him) in a simple way what it means. Also bear in mind that in the area of sexuality a distinction is quickly made between “decent” and “dirty” words. However, surveys and studies show that people associate different words and terms with very different feelings and evaluations. What is or sounds vulgar to some people can be quite affectionate to others. You can explain to your child why they should not use certain words or phrases and how particularly derogatory terms can affect you and other people.

INTERVIEW

PREVENTING SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE

CHILDREN NEED OUR PROTECTION

Mothers and fathers can do a lot to help their daughter or son in the prevention of abuse or violence. What is important in every-day parenting?

An interview with Renate Blum-Maurice, former family and child therapist at the Cologne Kinderschutz-Zentrum (Child Protection Center); member of the advisory board of the NRW Kinderschutzbund (Child Protection Association).

How can parents protect their child from an early age?

By paying attention to their needs and conveying a good feeling about their own body right from the start. From this perspective, a body-friendly upbringing can also be an important contribution to the prevention of sexualized violence. Babies need physical contact and loving care. With older children, for example, you can also roughhouse or play tickle games and teach them to say what they enjoy and what they don't – and also to say or express when they no longer want to play. This gives children a feeling for when and how they want to allow physical contact – and when and how they don't. And the children learn that their feelings and needs are respected and protected by their parents.

So it's about setting clear boundaries?

Boundaries and mutual respect for boundaries – parents can also be role models here: They must stop if a child expresses discomfort or if they no longer want to play, and the children also have the right to ask for a break at any time or to say no if they don't want to be tickled, hugged or kissed. Parents can also set an example in their contact with each other.

So affection and physical contact play a central role?

Correct. Children who feel emotionally accepted and have a positive feeling about their own body are better protected. We know from studies and our practical experience that children who receive little love, attention and physical contact are more likely to become victims of sexualized violence.

What else makes children strong?

Language! It is very important that parents teach their children positive terms: for the body, body parts and genitals, for cuddling or not wanting to cuddle, etc. In this way, children get to know their bodies and their needs well from an early age – and they learn to communicate. Children should also learn at an early age that they have their own rights, that they are allowed to ask questions, that they can say no and that they can rely on their parents' respect and protection. It can be helpful for parents and also for the child to talk to each other regularly, for example always before bedtime or in the afternoon. Then they can ask their child open and informal questions that interest them, for example: "How was your day? What did you experience? Is everything ok? Is there something you want to tell me?"

Should parents also talk to their children about their feelings?

You should definitely practice naming feelings such as joy, fear, confusion, sadness or discomfort with your children. Talking about pleasant or unpleasant, beautiful or stupid or even confusing feelings is important – but it is at least as important that parents respect their children's feelings. If a child no longer wants to sit on your lap, doesn't want to give the nice neighbor a kiss or has hurt themselves and is crying, then it is important that this reaction is respected by the parents. Whoever then makes fun or gets annoyed and says: "Don't be like that...", is sending the wrong signal to their child. If such signals are sent frequently, the child learns that their feelings do not count or are not important or correct.

Can guidelines help children?

Of course, depending on their age, children need clear guidelines on what they are (already) allowed to do and what they should not do, for example when and where they are allowed to go alone, when they should be back home, what tasks and freedom they have. These guidelines must be consistently adhered to and monitored by the parents. However, parents cannot watch their child around the clock. In addition, such round-the-clock protection also restricts children's learning – after all, they should become more independent at pre-school age and later be able to manage the journey to school alone, for example.

What should parents bear in mind when their children become more independent?

They should carefully weigh up what they can and cannot trust their child to do. This also depends, for example, on how far or how complicated the journey to school is. The best way for children to learn independence is gradually. Perhaps you accompany your child at the beginning, then agree with them that you will follow them at a distance until they manage the walk without you, preferably together with other children. It is equally important that everyone – children and adults – treats each other with respect within the family. There must be rules and these must be exemplified to the children: That no one should be hurt, that no one should be frightened, that everyone should be listened to, etc.

Does it make sense to point out potential dangers directly to children of pre-school age?

If you talk to children about (respectful) physical contact and sexuality, then you can also talk about violence and physical assault. Under no circumstances should it only be about molestation, however, as this could make the whole topic of sexuality threatening for the child. You should also be careful not to scare the child too much. Fear is not a good teacher here. After all, girls and boys alike should feel that their parents have confidence in them and that they can confide in them with their questions and worries.

Can you give an example of how can you say that?

Which words and concepts children understand depends very much on their development. In our experience, children from the age of around three or four can understand that there are adults or older children who like to be with (young) children, but don't care whether the child really likes it or not. And that these can also be people the child knows. Messages such as "your body belongs to you alone" or "your feelings are important" are important. Unpleasant touch can be rejected – "Saying no is allowed" – and burdensome secrets can be shared – "No one has the right to scare you." But most importantly: Children learn by example!

How can parents be role models?

If a child grows up at home in a friendly, caring, attentive and respectful atmosphere in which attention is paid to the child's behavior and changes in behavior, if the child does not have to be afraid of punishment, if they learn to name feelings and can talk about things that seem strange to them, this protects the child better than warnings given ten or a hundred times.

Sexualized violence can also occur among children. If adults notice this is happening, they should intervene and explain that no child may force another to do anything.



Children do not have to show affection or gratitude physically if they do not want to, by kissing or hugging, for example. They also have a right to bodily integrity – just like adults. So no one should touch a child if the child does not want them to. If the children are still too young to express this themselves, the parents must be their children's advocate.



It can also be useful to practice behavior with the child or tell them how to behave in certain situations, for example not answering the phone or opening the door when the parents are not around; or going to other adults or running away if the child gets into a strange or threatening situation with older children or with an adult alone or with other children. However, this only helps in situations involving strangers, which only make up a small percentage of sexualized violence cases. Sexualized violence often takes place at home or in the family environment. It is therefore important to teach children that perpetrators can often be known and trusted people. It is also helpful for children to learn to build trusting relationships from their parents as role models. It can be useful for the child to have several confidants or persons they feel safe turning to – parents should support this. It is then possible for the child to choose who they want to entrust with what and when. This is particularly important in situations where parents are not available as the first point of contact.

Can children be expected to do too much?

Parents should always be very attentive. Children are not “little adults” and it is not their job to look after themselves. It remains the task and responsibility of adults to respect, protect and support children in all their rights and needs. If a child is only given the message “you can protect yourself,” they are very likely to be overwhelmed in a critical situation and may blame themselves instead of confiding in their parents or other important caregivers.

NOTES

BROCHURES AND WEBSITES FOR PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

PARENTING GUIDE FOR PARENTS FEDERAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH (BfÖG)

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT...

A guide for parents on children's sexual development at elementary school age

Article number: 13660300

GOING THROUGH PUBERTY TOGETHER

A guide for parents on sexual development in adolescence

This brochure describes the sexual development of adolescents during puberty and the contribution parents can make to body education, contraception and the prevention of sexual violence.

Article number: 13660400

Brochure: Time for movement "Bewegung und Sport – Elterninfo"
(Exercise and physical activity – information for parents)

Brochure on the importance of exercise and physical activity.

Article number: 11041407

Brochure: Time to enjoy food "Essen und Trinken – Elterninfo"
(Food and drink – information for parents)

Brochure on the importance of food and drink.

Article number: 11041408

BROCHURES FEDERAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH (BfÖG)

Dem Leben auf der Spur (On the trail of life).

The media package for sex education

The package contains:

- the story "Dem Leben auf der Spur" (On the trail of life) *(PDF only)*
- the encyclopedia "Das kleine Körper-ABC" (The little body ABC)
Article number: 13160005
- the leaflet "Das Baby im Bauch der Mutter" (The baby in the mother's belly)
Article number: 13100000
- the double-sided poster "Wenn Eizelle und Samenzelle sich treffen" (When the egg cell and sperm cell meet") *Article number: 13160006*
- the cover letter for teachers and specialists *(PDF only)*
- the cover letter for parents and guardians *(PDF only)*

<https://shop.bioeg.de/geschichte-dem-leben-auf-der-spur/>

Trau dich! Ein Ratgeber für Eltern.

(Gaining confidence. A guide for parents)

Information on sexual abuse for parents of 8- to 12-year-old children

Article number: 16100102

Online sein mit Maß und Spaß

(Being online with moderation and fun)

A parents' guide to the correct use of digital media

Article number: 33215001

WEBSITES FOR PARENTS

www.bzkg.de

The Federal Center for the Protection of Children and Young People in the Media (BzKJ) provides information on the benefits and risks of media consumption, tips for parents and recommended links.

www.schau-hin.info

An initiative of the Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFJFS) and provides parents with practical guidance on media use and education.

www.jugendschutzlandesstellen.de

Here you will find a detailed list of addresses of several specialist and state offices for the protection of children and young people as well as the Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Kinder- und Jugenschutz e. V. (federal union for the protection of children and minors). Many of these organizations offer information on the subject of the protection of children and young people on their homepages, which are linked to this website.

www.jugendschutz.net

This website is operated by the "Zentralstelle der Obersten Landesjugendbehörden für Jugendschutz in Mediendiensten" (central office of the supreme state youth authorities for the protection of minors in media services). Their task is to track down content on the internet that is harmful to minors and make it inaccessible to children and young people. Anyone who accidentally lands on websites that are harmful to minors with their children can report them to the authorities using a clickable form.

www.familienhandbuch.de

The multilingual online handbook from the State Institute for Early Childhood Education (IFP) offers everything parents need to know about education, health, support, school, work and leisure.

www.klicksafe.de

The site provides information on a wide range of relevant youth protection topics. It also provides tips, brochures and materials.

www.juuuport.de

The site provides information and advice on various online topics.

WEBSITES FOR CHILDREN

www.wdrmaus.de/hoeren

Maus Radio provides podcasts and music for children.

www.fragfinn.de

Search engine for children with an extensive list of child-friendly websites which have been editorially reviewed by media educators.

sexedu.eduskills.plus

Is a sex education app for children. The topics are adapted for children at different stages of development. There is an accompanying handbook for parents, which is also available free of charge.

CONTACT ADDRESSES

Information hotline of the Federal Institute of Public Health on HIV and other sexually transmitted infections:

0221/892031 (price according to the price list of the telephone provider
for calls within the Cologne local network)

Monday to Thursday: 10 am to 10 pm

Friday to Sunday: 10 am to 6 pm

BlÖG's online advice service:

www.liebesleben.de

FURTHER SERVICES FROM THE BIÖG

**Brochures and media are available from BIÖG
by quoting the item number:**

BIÖG, 50819 Cologne

by fax: 0221/8992-257

by email: bestellung@bioeg.de

www.bioeg.de

www.sexualaufklaerung.de or www.loveline.de

BIÖG websites for young people:

www.loveline.de (sexuality, love and contraception)

www.liebesleben.de (HIV and STIs)

www.drugcom.de (addiction and drugs)

www.rauch-frei.info (smoking and quitting)

COUNSELING SERVICES FOR PARENTS

If you have further questions, need more information or have a specific problem, parents (or their children) can get advice from experts by phone, email or in person. The following nationwide associations offer this option at their local counseling centers or can refer you:

Arbeiterwohlfahrt Bundesverband e. V.

Heinrich-Albertz-Haus

Blücherstraße 62/63, 10961 Berlin, tel.: 030/26309-0

www.awo.org

Deutscher Caritasverband e. V.

Karlstraße 40, 79104 Freiburg, tel.: 0761/200-0

www.caritas.de

Der Paritätische

General association

Oranienburger Straße 13–14, 10178 Berlin, tel.: 030/24636-0

www.der-paritaetische.de

Diakonie Deutschland – Evangelischer Bundesverband

Caroline-Michaelis-Straße 1, 10115 Berlin, tel.: 030/65211-0

www.diakonie.de

donum vitae e. V.

Thomas-Mann-Straße 4, 53111 Bonn, tel.: 0228/369488-0

www.donumvitae.org

**pro familia – Deutsche Gesellschaft für Familienplanung,
Sexualpädagogik und Sexualberatung e. V.**

Federal association

Mainzer Landstraße 250–254, 60326 Frankfurt/M., tel.: 069/26957790

www.profamilia.de

Sozialdienst Katholischer Frauen Zentrale e. V.

Agnes-Neuhaus-Straße 5, 44135 Dortmund, tel.: 0231/557026-0

www.skf-zentrale.de

Municipal or district health offices also often offer advice on sexuality, sex education and sexually transmitted infections. Bundeskonferenz für Erziehungsberatung e. V. offers anonymous email counseling, moderated discussion forums and a chat especially for parents:

www.bke-elternberatung.de

Intergeschlechtliche Menschen e. V.

Slebuschstieg 6, 20537 Hamburg, tel.: 0170-7090385

www.im-ev.de

IVIM – OII Germany

Office partnership

Naunynstr. 30, 10997 Berlin

www.oii germany.org**TELEPHONE, CHAT AND EMAIL ADVICE
FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND
PARENTS****Nummer gegen Kummer**

Nummer gegen Kummer is a telephone helpline and counseling service for children, young people and parents.

Phone number for children and young people

Tel.: 116111 (free nationwide), Mondays to Saturdays 2-8 pm, "Jugendliche beraten Jugendliche" (young people advising young people), Saturdays 2-8 pm; email advice at

www.nummergegenkummer.de**Phone number for parents**

0800/1110550, Mondays to Fridays – 9 am to 5 pm, Tuesdays and Thursdays also until 7 pm, free of charge nationwide

www.nummergegenkummer.de

Around the clock, free of charge nationwide.

**POINTS OF CONTACT
REGARDING SEXUAL ABUSE
OR SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMBFSFJ)

www.bmbfsfj.bund.de/bmbfsfj/themen/kinder-und-jugend/kinder-und-jugendschutz

Independent commissioner for the investigation of child sexual abuse

www.beauftragter-missbrauch.de

www.bundeskoordinierung.de

Federal Coordination of Specialized Advice Against Sexual Violence in Childhood and Youth (BKSF)

Political representation and information and service points for the specialized advisory centers working against sexual violence in childhood and youth

www.dgfpi.de

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Prävention und Intervention bei Kindesmisshandlung, -vernachlässigung und sexualisierter Gewalt e. V. (German society for the prevention of and intervention in cases of child abuse, neglect and sexual violence)

Under the page www.jugendschutzlandesstellen.de you will find a list of the real and virtual addresses of several specialist and state offices for the protection of children and young people as well as the Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Kinder- und Jugendschutz e. V. (federal union for the protection of children and minors). Many of these organizations offer information on the subject of child and youth protection on their websites.

Nationally known institutions are:**Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft****Kinder- und Jugendschutz e. V. (BAJ)**

Mühlendamm 3, 10178 Berlin, tel.: 030/40040300

Email: info@bag-jugendschutz.de

www.bag-jugendschutz.de

Deutscher Kinderschutzbund Bundesverband e. V.

Federal office

Schöneberger Straße 15, 10963 Berlin

Tel.: 030/214809-0

www.dksb.de

Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Kinderschutz-Zentren

Federal office

Bonner Straße. 145, 50968 Cologne

Tel.: 0221/569753, fax: 0221/5697550

www.kinderschutz-zentren.org

Sexual abuse helpline

Free and anonymous service for victims of sexual violence, for relatives, persons in the immediate circle, for professionals and all interested parties

Tel.: 0800/2255530

www.hilfe-portal-missbrauch.de/startseite

Support for people who have experienced sexual violence in their childhood and adolescence, as well as for relatives, professionals and anyone with questions or concerns about a child – in person, online or by phone.

www.wildwasser.de

Association against sexual abuse

www.zartbitter.de

Contact point for help against sexual abuse of girls and boys, Cologne

www.nina-info.de

N.I.N.A. is the national infoline, network and point of contact for sexual violence against girls and boys.

Sexual abuse helpline: 0800/2255530

www.dgfpi.de

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Prävention und Intervention bei Kindesmisshandlung und -vernachlässigung e. V.

Dunkelziffer e. V.

Initial counseling and telephone help for boys and girls, parents and caregivers: 040/421070010

Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays 10 am – 1 pm, Tuesdays and Wednesdays 2 pm – 4 pm

www.dunkelziffer.de

TELEPHONE, CHAT AND EMAIL ADVICE FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND PARENTS REGARDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

www.schreib-ollie.de

Online counseling regarding sexual abuse and part of the sexual abuse helpline offering. It is a service offered by N.I.N.A. e. V. – sponsored by the Independent Commissioner Against Child Sexual Abuse.

www.unddu-portal.de/de

The platform of Innocence in Danger e. V. is aimed at young people and relates to sexual violence among young people. The platform provides knowledge and seeks to strengthen skills. It is also possible for users to seek help directly.

