Sexuality and Early Childhood Play

It's a myth that sexuality doesn't start until a child approaches puberty. Children have sexual identities and curiosity, at different levels, from birth. This means that talking with children about sex is not a one-time event: it is a life process that will evolve as children grow. Parents are sometimes puzzled as to how to handle questions or behavior in their youngsters which pertain to sexuality. Following is information that can help.

**Responding to Young Children’s Sexual Behavior**

Discuss and clarify your sexual values with others and rehearse sexual words and ways of responding to situations. This way you will be prepared when you encounter children’s sexual curiosity.

Purchase or borrow good sexuality education books for your child and yourself.

Use correct vocabulary. Children need correct terms for labeling their genitals, just as they need correct terms for other body parts. Also, talk about love and affection as well as providing children with facts about anatomy and sexual functioning.

Be a good listener. Ask children what they think about sexual topics to discover their current level of understanding.

Approach topics when opportunities naturally occur such as when a child comments or otherwise responds to nudity, a door closed for privacy or a pregnant woman.

Respond in a language that the child understands and in a way that is matter-of-fact. For example: If a 3-year old shares an erection with you; or if a 4-year old draws a picture of a naked person with detail, you might respond with:

- “Wow! Your penis really grew. That happens sometimes to boys.”
- “You really must have worked hard on this picture. I can see two eyes, nose, mouth, hair, two arms, two legs, and a vulva.”

Protect your child from exposure to inappropriate sexually oriented material at the movies or even at home, on television. Young children are not ready to deal with sexually explicit material.

Overall, be an “askable” parent. Keep lines of communication open so you can continue to convey knowledge and your values to your child as he/she grows.

**When Does the Behavior Become a Problem?**

- When a child’s sexual behavior is frequent, despite efforts to redirect them, and becomes a preoccupation.
- When there is use of force, notable size difference or several years age difference between the children involved.
- When the activity is accompanied by anger and tension instead of playfulness and spontaneity.
- When children imitate adult sexual behaviors.