

## Infancy and Childhood Sexuality

Casey T. Tobin, PhD

Sex differentiation occurs while a baby is still in the womb. Before week six of the pregnancy, all fetuses have the same basic structures resembling those of a female. Between 6 and 8 weeks, gonadal differentiation occurs, starting with the SRY gene, which is located on the Y chromosome of a male, therefore is absent in females. The SRY gene stimulates the fetus to begin transitioning from its current female-like anatomy to that of a male. Because the SRY gene is absent in the XX chromosomes of a female, no signal occurs and the anatomy remains female. By week 20 of the pregnancy, the external genitalia are fully formed and the sex of the fetus can be determined via ultrasound imaging.

In utero and during infancy, children often experience spontaneous reflexive responses, which include erections and vaginal lubrication. Infants are likely to seek oral satisfaction through sucking and in early childhood, genital exploration is a common and natural part of learning about one's body. Some infants and children may engage in occasional self-stimulating behavior; however, this is for self-soothing rather than for sexual pleasure.

### Psychologically

The first intimate relationship that a child has is with their parents or caregiver. This relationship bond is cultivated and maintained via physical contact, and is strengthened by sensual contact such as cuddling, breast feeding, and rocking. An infant's emotional state is often centered on the connection with their caregiver and through this attachment, children learn to trust, love and depend on others. If this bond of attachment is disrupted or damaged, intimate relationships in their childhood and later in life may be affected.

Infancy is the period between birth and the development of language during the first

couple of years. Because infants have the propensity to recognize sounds and visual patterns, within a short period of time infants can recognize their caregiver's face, further nurturing the bond between child and caregiver. Infants will develop object permanence, and at eighteen months, a child can problem solve via learning or mental imaging, rather than trial-and-error experimentation. Three to six-month-old infants have behavioral reactions to various emotional experiences such as excitement, happy, fear, and sadness.

During childhood, significant language and cognitive development occurs. Language moves from comprehending spoken words without being able to speak them, to using complex word combinations, to sentence structure. Cognitive abilities begin with concrete and tangible understandings and advance to logical operations on abstract and symbolic materials. Between 2 and 8, children can solve various logical problems and use mental operations that are flexible and develop operational thinking. Logic becomes more apparent between the ages of 7 and 13 by demonstrating an understanding of classification of ideas, time and quantity, as well as hierarchical relationships.

Prior to the age of 2, children lack an understanding of others' point of view, often referred to as egocentrism. During early and late childhood, children progress not only in self-awareness of their own behaviors, characteristics, and emotions, but in others as well. This further develops into empathy and understanding of other's reactions, leading to moral reasoning. These emotional developments enrich social skills and functioning of a child.

### Sociologically

From the time they are born, children are socialized in a manner that corresponds with their gender. From a gender normative perspective, girls are often surrounded by pink blankets and dolls, while boys have blue blankets and trucks. Because of this overt separation of the genders,

children become aware of which gender they identify with between the ages of 2 and 3. Using the knowledge about their gender identity received from societal cues along with knowledge attained from asking questions, children learn about gender roles and begin to mimic these by playing games such as “house”.

During infancy, children are often curious about their own body including touching their own genitals and masturbation, and have no inhibitions around nudity. After the age of 2, children become curious about bodies other than their own. They may begin engaging in sexual exploration that includes touching their own genitals as well as their peers’, talking about sex, and noticing differences between boys and girls, and children and adults. This curiosity helps children learn about the differences between the sexes and is considered a normal stage of development. Most children engage in social play with friends of their same sex, as well as learn about gender roles and expectations. By the ages of 9 or 10, most social play is with same-sex friends. In late childhood, between the ages of 9 and 12, social norms become clearer, and there is a closeness that develops between same gender friends.

### **Further Reading:**

Darling, C., Cassidy, D., & Powell, L. (2014). *Family life education: Working with families across the lifespan* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

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