

12-Part Sexuality Series for Parents with Children with an Intellectual Disability

Part 3 of 12: The Wonder Years

Typically developing 2-5 year old children have gained a sense of familiarity with their own bodies and turn their attention to the bodies of other adults and children. These are the years when children are fascinated with all things bathroom and will “peek” at others in the bathroom, ask lots of questions about body parts and will play games such as “doctor” and “house” that may involve looking at the genitals of others. All this curiosity is healthy and normal. It provides a forum to teach the medically correct names for body parts, leads to introduction to the topic of where babies come from, gives a starting point to teach the basic rules of privacy and lends itself to discussion on personal rights and good and bad touch.

Children at this age have a beginning sense of gender identity and know that they are either a boy or girl or they may question their gender assignment. At this age children identify things as being either masculine or feminine.

In terms of sexual touching, some boys and girls at this age will touch or rub their genitals or rub against furniture as a way of relaxing. This behaviour is relaxing and not sexual in nature. There is no reason for concern if this behaviour occurs or if it does not occur. Behaviours that are concerning involve sexual behaviours that mimic adult sexual behaviours or involve an element of force or coercion. Should this behaviour be observed, it is important to seek professional support.

Some people with an intellectual disability may not show signs of curiosity at this young age but will do so when they are older. This becomes concerning and may be misconstrued as being inappropriate; especially if there are age differences. For example; if a 12 year-old child with an intellectual disability is peaking at a 4 year-old

child, the immediate thought is that the older child is an offender; when in fact, he or she may be engaging in behaviour that is normal for this stage of development. It is important to remember that this curiosity is normal and to explore the motive behind the behaviour should a child be older and these behaviours are observed. Teaching the need to respect the privacy of others as well as teaching personal modesty are important as they protect children from being falsely accused of inappropriate behaviour and may protect them from being victimized.

Easy ways to start teaching about privacy include:

- Labelling places, body parts, behaviour and conversations as being public or private.
- Knock and wait for your child to invite you to enter the bathroom or their bedroom.
- Request that they knock before they enter the bathroom or the bedrooms of other family members.

This early sense of wonder leads to greater knowledge and the start of an understanding of concepts that will continue to develop through the years.

References

Sexual Health through Education (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://www.serc.mb.ca/sexual-health>

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Teaching Sexual Health (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca/>

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Part 3: Stage 3 of Sexual Development (April 2015)