

Growth and Development, Ages Six to Eight

What Parents Need to Know

Human development is a lifelong process of physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional growth and change. In the early stages of life—from babyhood to childhood, childhood to adolescence, and adolescence to adulthood—enormous changes take place. Throughout the process, each person develops attitudes and values that guide choices, relationships, and understanding.

Sexuality is also a lifelong process. Infants, children, teens, and adults are sexual beings. Just as it is important to enhance a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, so it is important to lay foundations for a child's sexual growth. Adults have a responsibility to help children understand and accept their evolving sexuality.

Each stage of development encompasses specific markers. The following developmental guidelines apply to most children in this age group. However, each child is an individual and may reach these stages of development earlier or later than other children the same age. When concerns arise about a specific child's development, parents or other caregivers should consult a doctor or other child development professional.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Most children ages six to eight will:

- Experience slower growth of about 2 ½ inches and eight pounds per year
- Grow longer legs relative to their total height and begin resembling adults in the proportion of legs to body
- Develop less fat and grow more muscle than in earlier years
- Increase in strength
- Lose their baby teeth and begin to grow adult teeth which may appear too big for their face
- Use small and large motor skills in sports and other activities

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Most children ages six to eight will:

- Develop the skills to process more abstract concepts and complex ideas (e.g., pregnancy, addition/subtraction, etc.)
- Begin elementary school
- Spend more time with the peer group and turn to peers for information (They need information sources outside of family, and other adults become important in their lives.)
- Be able to focus on the past and future as well as the present
- Develop an increased attention span
- Improve in self-control, being able to conform to adult ideas of what is “proper” behavior and to recognize appropriateness in behavior
- Understand the concepts of normality/abnormality, feel concern with being normal and curiosity about differences
- Begin to develop as an individual
- Think for themselves and develop individual opinions, especially as they begin to read and to acquire information through the media

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Most children ages six to eight will:

- Become more modest and want privacy
- Develop relationships with and love people outside the family as their emotional needs are met by peers as well as family
- Develop less physically demonstrative relationships and express love through sharing and talking (They may be embarrassed by physical affection.)
- Need love and support, but feel less willing to ask for it

- Understand more complex emotions, such as confusion and excitement
- Want more emotional freedom and space from parents
- Become better at controlling and concealing feelings
- Begin to form a broader self-concept and recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, especially with regard to social, academic, and athletic skills
- Have friends and sustained peer group interactions

SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

Most children ages six to eight will:

- Prefer to socialize with their own gender almost exclusively and maintain a fairly rigid separation between genders (They may tease someone who acts in a way that does not adhere to pre-defined gender roles.)
- Recognize the social stigmas and taboos surrounding sexuality, especially if parents are nervous about the subject, and will be less open about asking questions
- Understand more complex ideas with regard to sexuality and begin to understand sexual behaviors apart from making a baby
- Look to peers, media, and other sources for information about sex and sexuality
- Understand gender role stereotypes, if presented as such
- May engage in same-gender sexual exploration
- Have a stronger self-concept in terms of gender and body image

WHAT FAMILIES NEED TO DO TO RAISE SEXUALLY HEALTHY CHILDREN

To help six- to eight-year-old children develop a healthy sexuality, families should:

- Continue to provide information about sexuality, even if a child does not ask for it. At these ages, children may ask fewer questions, but still have lots of curiosity and need information about sexuality.
- Explain that there are many different types of families and all types have equal value and deserve respect.
- Provide basic information about sexuality
- Inform children about the changes that will take place when they begin puberty. Though most six- to eight-year-old children do not experience these changes, the age at which some begin to show signs of puberty,

- such as pubic hair, breast buds, and hair under the arms is gradually decreasing, so children need this information sooner.
- Recognize that everyone does not have the same sexual orientation. Acknowledge to children that many people have romantic feelings for members of another gender or other genders, and some have these feelings for members of their same gender.

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10 TIPS ON INITIATING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GROWTH:

Initiating conversations about growth, development, and sexuality may be difficult for some parents because they did not grow up in an environment where the subject was discussed. Some parents may be afraid they do not know the right answers or feel confused about the proper amount of information to offer.

To help, here are 10 tips to:

1. First, encourage communication by reassuring your children they can talk to you about anything.
2. Take advantage of teachable moments. A friend's pregnancy, news article, or a TV show can help start a conversation.
3. Listen more than you talk. Think about what you're being asked. Confirm with your child that what you heard is in fact what they meant to ask.
4. Don't jump to conclusions. The fact that a child asks about sex does not mean they are having or thinking about having sex.
5. Answer questions simply and directly. Give factual, honest, short, and simple answers.
6. Respect your child's views. Share your thoughts and values and help your child express theirs.
7. Reassure your children that they are normal—as are their questions and thoughts.
8. When they are older, teach your children ways to make good decisions about sex and coach them on how to get out of risky situations.
9. Admit when you don't know the answer to a question. Suggest the two of you find the answer together online or in a library.
10. Discuss that at times your child may feel more comfortable talking with someone other than you. Together, think of other trusted adults with whom they can talk.