Sexual Development in Children

Research has shown that genital sexual responses are present from birth, and there is a wide range of normal sexual behavior amongst children. Family and culture, as well as biology and genetics influence sexual development. The following describes the typical sexual development in children.

Normal/Common Sexuality (or Normal Sexual Development)

- Typical Behaviors for 2-6 year-olds: An understanding that boys & girls have different private parts, use words to identify these parts, have limited knowledge of pregnancy and childbirth, do not have a strong sense of modesty and enjoy being nude, use elimination (bathroom) words with peers, may explore the differences between boys and girls (sex play), curious about sexual and genital body parts, touch their privates (even in public), and experience pleasure from touching their own genitals.
- Typical Behaviors for 7-12 year-olds: Learn correct names for private parts (but use slang names), more knowledge about masturbation/intercourse/pregnancy, understand about the physical changes in puberty (usually by age 10), sexual play with children they know, touch own genitals at home and in private, look at nude pictures, interested in the opposite sex, shy about undressing, shy around strange men, and use mild sexual talk with peers.

Normal/Common Sex Play

- This type of behavior is typically considered part of the way that children learn about themselves, others, and the world. It is part of their normal developmental process just like learning to talk or learning to walk.
- It is often referred to as “Playing Doctor” or “Playing House.”
- It is exploratory and spontaneous, occurs every so often (not all the time when the kids play together), mutually agreed upon, children are similar in age/size/developmental level, and children usually know each other well (siblings, cousins, peers).
- It is not associated with high levels of fear/anger/anxiety.
- Decreases when caregivers tell children to stop, and can be controlled with close supervision.