



*Lucy Daniels*

***Center for Early Childhood***

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Protection Children from Sexual Overstimulation**

To wear clothes or not to wear clothes: an age-old parental question. Parents want their children to learn to be comfortable with bodies. We will provide guidance based on an understanding of the meaning of family nudity and related matters to young children.

**Children are sexually excitable:** As many parents know, children are naturally curious about sexual anatomy and functions. This curiosity is different from the curiosity children have about questions such as: "Why is the sky blue?" Sexuality is among the most fundamental aspects of our biology - it is a basic appetite and desire. Children do not need to be taught to be excited if they view or have physical contact with sexual body parts. How could that be taught anyway? Children's sexual responsiveness to sexual physical features - particularly breasts and genitalia - is hard-wired within us just as it is for every other mammalian species.

Healthy children begin to respond to sexual stimuli in early childhood. *Like older children and adolescents, 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children become excited when they observe nudity in situations such as dressing, bathing, showering and toileting, or sexual activity.* Preschool children experience considerable sexual stimulation, even when they are not exposed to extra stimulation. Think about the number of daily occasions, and amount of time and energy, that most three or four or five year old children devote to the pleasurable stimulation of their genitals. (Girls are more circumspect than boys in these masturbatory activities, perhaps because of societal molding.)

**How do children express sexual excitement?:** Young children are not born with the capacity to manage strong feelings. Managing strong feelings involves not only being able to contain them inside, but also to understand

what the feeling is, why it has come about, and what to do about the feeling. Children should be protected from being overwhelmed by feelings that are either too intense or beyond their understanding while they are growing in the capacity to manage feelings.

Extra sexual feelings arising from external stimulation are generally both overly intense and beyond the understanding of children. External stimulation stimulates children to look, touch, and wish to interact with the stimulating person in ways that they can't really make sense of. Children are susceptible to becoming confused, frightened, guilty or ashamed about these extra sexual feelings directed to family members, and to developing self-protections (defense mechanisms) against their own painful reactions. These self-protections may limit children's emotional development. Examples of common reactions to excessive sexual stimulation include substituting aggressive feelings for sexual feelings; distractibility, or over-control of feelings, enabling children to distance themselves from disturbing sexual feelings; and excessive sexual play or masturbation, transforming a passive and troubling experience of being excited to a more anxiety-free experience of actively bringing about excitement in oneself or another.

**Why doesn't sexual openness work?** Parents generally engage in physical openness for the best of motives. However, physical openness generally does not support children's sexual development. Such exposure would work if it were the case that children developed simply on the basis of modeling, rewards, and punishments. In that event, children would model themselves on a comfortable sexual openness. However, children have reactions and fantasies, an inner, personal world, and parents therefore should provide an environment that protects them from excessive and confusing feelings and fantasies.

**Some practical recommendations:** We have the following recommendations:

- Eliminate exposure to parental nudity (intimate areas of body) by age three, including during bathing and showering. Children should be especially protected from exposure to the opposite sex parent, generally the more sexually stimulating parent.
- Protect children from public restrooms where they would be exposed to nudity of the opposite sex. This may take effort, but generally can be accomplished.

- Bathe siblings separately by age three. Lucy Daniels Center clinicians have frequently found that children who bathe with siblings may have more difficulty settling down to sleep, or be more likely to become involved in childhood sexual play.
- Cease wiping children's anal area as soon as feasible, even if they continue to soil a bit. The anal area is a source of sexual feeling for children, as it is for many adults.
- Promote bathroom privacy for adults, and as much privacy as possible for children.
- Avoid intimate sexual activity until children are clearly asleep, and be discreetly quiet if bedroom walls are shared.
- Control access to TV and videos, and restrict any sexually stimulating content.

**Will privacy produce shame?:** Privacy per se does not induce shame: negative attitudes convey shame. Positive attitudes about bodies and sexuality, expressed through emotions and words, are the best way to convey and support children's pride in their bodies and sexuality. For example, a father conveys pride in sexuality when he says to his three-year-old daughter, "Sweetheart, you are growing up and it is time that our bodies became more private to each other. This is part of growing up. Someday, you will find the man that you love and you can share your body privately with him, just like mom and I do with each other." Note how straightforward this is, how the child is helped to see herself as an individual growing into a rich future, and how sexuality is valued (and discussed!) at the same time that boundaries are placed around its physical expression.

Finally, we recommend that parents do not follow these recommendations to an excessive or overly scrupulous degree. Serendipitous, occasional viewings of parents' intimate bodily areas are inevitable and healthy parts of family life, and should not be treated as a big deal when they occur. When all is said and done, a parent's own comfort with sexuality, their words and encouragements, and their example of a loving relationship with their spouse best supports children to develop their own comfort, pride, and pleasure in their bodies and sexuality.