

## **Masturbation in Preschoolers....Should you worry?**

Adapted from *Contemporary Pediatrics*, 1988

Masturbation is self-stimulation of the genitals for pleasure and self-comfort. It is a normal, healthy activity at any age. During masturbation, children usually rub themselves with their hands. Girls may rock against an object such as a stuffed animal or pillow. Children usually appear dazed, flushed, and preoccupied while they are masturbating.

Some parents are surprised that masturbation can normally begin in toddlers and preschoolers. Up to one third of children discover masturbation while exploring their bodies at 1 or 2 years of age. Most continue to do it simply because it feels good. Children may masturbate as often as several times each day, or as seldom as once a week. Masturbation occurs more often when they are sleepy, bored, watching television, or under stress.

Some children masturbate frequently because they are unhappy about something, such as the birth of a sibling or having their pacifier taken away. Others are reacting to punishment or parental pressure to stop masturbating, which only makes them do it more. Masturbation has no medical causes. Irritation of the genital area causes pain or itching; it does not cause masturbation.

Once a child discovers masturbation, he will seldom stop doing it completely. He may do it less frequently if power struggles or unhappy feelings are remedied. By 5 or 6 years of age, most children have learned some discretion and will masturbate only in private. Masturbation may continue through childhood and becomes almost universal at puberty in response to the normal surges in hormones and sexual drive.

Masturbation does not cause any physical injury or harm to the body. It is not abnormal or excessive unless it is done deliberately in public places after 5 or 6 years of age. It does not mean your child will be oversexed, promiscuous, or sexually deviant. Only if adults overreact and make masturbation seem dirty or wicked will it cause emotional harm, such as guilt and sexual hang-ups.

Adopt a realistic approach. It is impossible to eliminate masturbation. Accept the fact that your child has learned about it and enjoys it. You want your child to feel good about masturbation. The only thing you can control is where he does it. A reasonable goal is to permit masturbation only in the bedroom and bathroom. You might say to your child, "It's OK to do that in your bedroom or the bathroom." If you completely ignore masturbation, no matter where your child does it, he will think he can do it freely in any setting.

Ignore masturbation at naptime and bedtime. Leave your child alone at these times, and do not keep checking on her. Protect your child's right to privacy. Distract or discipline your child for masturbation at other times. First try to distract your child with a toy or activity. If this fails, explain to your child: "I know that feels good, and it's okay to do it in your room or the bathroom, but do not do it in the rest of the house when other people are around." By the time children are 4 or 5 years old, they become sensitive to other people's feelings and understand that they should masturbate only when they are alone. Younger children may have to be sent to their rooms to masturbate. Discuss this approach with your child's day care or preschool staff. Ask your child's caregiver or teacher to respond to your child's masturbation by first trying to distract the child. If this doesn't work, they should catch the child's attention with comments such as, "We need you join us now." Masturbation should be tolerated at school only at naptime. Increase physical contact with your child. Some children will masturbate less if they receive extra hugging and cuddling throughout the day. Try to be sure that your child receives at least 1 hour every day of special time together and physical affection from you. The most common mistake that parents make is to try to eliminate masturbation completely. This leads to a power struggle, which the parents inevitably lose. Children should not be physically punished for masturbation, nor yelled at or lectured about it. Do not label masturbation as bad, dirty, evil, or sinful, and do not tie your child's hands or use any kind of restraints. All of these approaches lead only to resistance and possibly later to sexual inhibitions. Call our office if you suspect that your child was taught to masturbate by someone, or who is discovered to attempt to masturbate others.