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 aged zero to three will:

- Double their height between birth and age three
- Triple their weight between birth and age three
- Develop teeth and the ability to eat solid foods
- Develop 75 percent of their brain capacity
- Learn to crawl and walk
- Develop large motor skills such as running, jumping, and climbing up stairs
- Begin to take off and put on clothes
- Begin to control body functions through toilet training

**Cognitive Development**
Most children aged zero to three will:

- Learn language and communication skills and advance from using single words to phrases to complete sentences
- Develop an imagination and begin to create imaginary scenarios and friends
- Understand the world primarily through their family
- Begin to interact with peers through imitation [Although some children at this age do not yet play directly with each other, they often engage in parallel play.]
- Think concretely, retain some information, and process information primarily through their five senses—by seeing, touching, hearing, tasting, and smelling
- Identify with and begin to imitate their same-sex parent or guardian
• Begin to understand the differences between male and female (gender differences and
gender roles)
• Imitate the language and behavior of trusted adults

**Emotional Development**
Most children aged zero to three will:

• Develop trust for caregivers who fulfill their needs, such as responding when the child is
hungry, wet, etc.
• Begin to test independence and explore limits, but still seek closeness to primary
caregiver
• Have relationships primarily with family members who are the most important people in
the child's life at this time
• Physically demonstrate feelings, such as kissing and hugging to show love and hitting to
show anger
• Master the idea of being happy, sad, or angry, but will generally choose to express
emotions physically rather than verbally [The "terrible twos" occur when a child is
developing a sense of self outside of and distinct from others, and expresses this
individuality by saying "no" and by insisting on doing things him/herself.]

**Sexual Development**
Most children aged zero to three will:

• Be curious and explore their own body and others' bodies
• Experience an erection or vaginal lubrication
• Touch their genitals for pleasure
• Talk openly about their bodies
• Be able to say and understand, when taught, the appropriate names for body parts (head,
nose, stomach, penis, vulva, etc.)

**What Families Need to Do to Raise Sexually Healthy Children**
To help children ages zero to three to develop a healthy sexuality, families should:

• Help children feel good about their entire body. Caregivers should name all body parts
accurately and convey that the body and its functions are natural and healthy.
• Touch and comfort children often to help them understand love and how it can be shared.
Meeting children's needs also helps them develop trust.
• Help children begin to understand the difference between public and private behaviors
and that certain behaviors, such as picking one's nose or touching one's genitals, are
private ones.
• Teach about anatomical differences between males and females while maintaining that
boys and girls are equally special.
• Teach children that they can say no to unwanted touch, regardless of who is attempting to
touch them, and that they have a right to be respected when they say no.
• Describe bodily processes, such as pregnancy and birth, in very simple terms.
• Avoid shame and guilt about body parts and functions.
Ages Four to Five—What You Need to Know

Physical Development
Most children aged four to five will:

- Continue to grow, but at a slower rate than during infancy and the toddler years [Some parts grow faster or sooner than others. For example, organs grow faster than the body, giving preschoolers a rounded tummy.]
- Reach at least 50 percent of their adult height and about 20 percent of their adult weight by age five
- Develop more coordinated large motor skills, enabling them to skip, run, and climb up and down stairs
- Develop fine motor skills, enabling them to tie shoelaces, button shirts, use scissors, and draw recognizable figures
- Continue significant brain development, completing 90 percent of such development by age five
- Develop increased lung capacity and the ability to breathe more deeply
- Lose their "baby look" as their limbs grow longer
- Appear about the same size, regardless of gender
- Increase in overall health and gain resistance to germs

Cognitive Development
Most children aged four to five will:

- Interact with and learn about the world through play activities
- Begin to experience the world through exploration and feel inquisitive about self and surroundings
- Begin separation from family as they experience less proximity to caregivers and more independence
- Understand what is good and bad (though they may not understand why) and be able to follow the rules
- Be able to understand and accomplish simple activities to be healthy, such as brushing teeth or washing hands
- Understand the concept of privacy

Emotional Development
Most children aged four to five will:

- Still rely on caregivers, while no longer needing or wanting as much physical contact with caregivers as they received in infancy and as toddlers
- Continue to express emotions physically and to seek hugs and kisses
- Socialize with peers, begin to develop relationships, and learn to recognize some peers as friends and others as people they don't like
- Have more opportunities to interact with peers, either through school or recreational activities, and will play with other children
**Sexual Development**
Most children aged four to five will:

- Experience vaginal lubrication or erection
- Touch their genitals for pleasure
- Feel curiosity about everything, and ask about where babies come from and how they were born
- Feel curiosity about bodies and may play games like doctor
- Feel sure of their own gender and have the ability to recognize males and females
- Begin to recognize traditional male and female gender roles and to distinguish these roles by gender
- Become conscious of their own body, how it appears to others, and how it functions

**What Families Need to Do to Raise Sexually Healthy Children**
To help four- to five-year-old children develop a healthy sexuality, families should:

- Help children understand the concept of privacy and that talk about sexuality is private and occurs at home.
- Teach correct names of the major body parts (internal and external) and their basic functions.
- Explain how babies "get into" the mother's uterus.
- Encourage children to come to them or other trusted adults for information about sexuality.

**Ages Six to Eight—What You Need to Know**

**Physical Development**
Most children aged six to eight will:

- Experience slower growth of about 2½ 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 aged 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 aged 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 aged six to eight will:

• Prefer to socialize with their own gender almost exclusively and maintain a fairly rigid separation between males and females [They will 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 intercourse apart from making a baby
• Look to peers, media, and other sources for information about sex
• 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 important sexuality issues, such as HIV/AIDS, abortion, marriage, and sexual abuse.
• 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 that 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 the other gender, and some have these feelings for members of the same gender.

Ages Nine to 12—What You Need to Know

Physical Development
Most young people aged nine to 12 will:

• Experience a growth spurt with significant weight gain, muscle growth, and genital maturation [Growth spurt begins earlier for girls; lasts longer for boys, who end up taller].
• Enter puberty, a time when hormones produced in the pituitary gland trigger production of testosterone in males, estrogen/progesterone in females [This usually begins earlier in girls (nine to 12) than in boys (11 to 14).] During puberty—
  o Skin becomes more oily and may develop pimples.
  o Sweating increases and youth may have body odor.
  o Hair grows under arms and on pubis and, in males, on face and chest.
  o Body proportions change [hips widen in females, shoulders broaden in males].
  o Joints may ache due to rapid growth.
  o In males, genitals mature, scrotum darkens, voice deepens, sperm is produced, and erections, ejaculation, and wet dreams are more frequent.
  o In females, genitals mature, breasts develop, vaginal lubrication increases, and ovulation and menstrual cycle begin.
• Masturbate [both males and females] and may have fantasies about others and about sexual intimacy

Cognitive Development
Most young people aged nine to 12 will:

• Move toward independence as they progress to middle/junior high school
• Continue developing skills in making decisions as they become more independent
• Begin to consider future careers and occupations
• Shift their school focus from play-centered activities to academics
• Begin to look to peers and media for information and advice [Friends greatly influence them.]
• Develop increasing capability for social conscience and for abstract thought, including understanding complex issues such as poverty and war
• Take on increased responsibility, such as family jobs and babysitting

**Emotional Development**
Most young people aged nine to 12 will:

• Want to blend in and not stand out from their peers in any way, particularly as to gender roles and sexuality
• Feel concern about outward appearance [They want to look like "everyone else."]
• Become self-conscious and self-centered
• Have ambivalent, conflicting feelings about puberty and about sexual desire and want to be independent and to conform
• Care greatly about relationships with peers, friendships, dating, and crushes and give peers more importance than family
• Relate to both same-gender and opposite-gender peers and may develop sexual feelings for others as a new dimension within relationships
• Develop the capacity to understand the components of a caring, loving relationship
• Experience feelings of insecurity and begin to doubt self-concept and previous self-confidence [Girls, especially, often experience a significant drop in self-esteem.]
• Struggle with family relationships and desire privacy and separation from family [They test limits and push for independence.]
• Experience mood swings, especially evident in family relationships
• Develop infatuations or "crushes" and may begin dating

**Sexual Development**
Most young people aged nine to 12 will:

• Have an emerging sense of self as a young adult
• Feel conscious of their sexuality and how they choose to express it
• Understand jokes with sexual content
• Feel concerns about being normal, such as whether it is normal to masturbate, have wet dreams, etc.
• Feel anxious about puberty, when it will happen, how it will occur, how to be prepared, etc.
• Feel shy about asking questions of caregivers, especially regarding sexuality, and may act like they already know all the answers
• Value privacy highly

**What Families Need to Do to Raise Sexually Healthy Youth**
To help nine- to 12-year-old youth develop a healthy sexuality, families should:

• Help young people understand puberty and the changes they are going through and that these changes, including menstruation and nocturnal emissions (ejaculation), are normal.
• Respect young people's privacy while encouraging open communication.
• Convey that growth and maturation rates differ from person to person.
• Help young people understand that, while they are maturing physically, they still have lots of emotional and cognitive growth ahead and that sexual intercourse is not healthy, appropriate, or wise at this time in their lives.
• Acknowledge that abstinence is normal and healthy, that sexual development is healthy and natural, and that, as they grow older, there will be many ways to express sexuality that do not include sexual intercourse.
• Discuss the important relationship between sexual and emotional feelings.
• Be open to conversations about contraception and condoms and respond honestly and accurately when young people ask about them.

Ages 13 to 17—What You Need to Know

Physical Development
Most teens ages 13 to 17 will:

• Complete puberty and the physical transition from childhood to adulthood
• Reach nearly their adult height, especially females [Males continue to grow taller into their early twenties.]

Cognitive Development
Most teens ages 13 to 17 will:

• Attain cognitive maturity—the ability to make decisions based on knowledge of options and their consequences
• Continue to be influenced by peers [The power of peer pressure lessens after early adolescence.]
• Build skills to become self-sufficient
• Respond to media messages but develop increasing ability to analyze those messages
• Develop increasingly mature relationships with friends and family
• Seek increased power over their own lives
• Learn to drive, increasing their independence

Emotional Development
Most teens ages 13 to 17 will:

• Have the capacity to develop long-lasting, mutual, and healthy relationships, if they have the foundations for this development—trust, positive past experiences, and an understanding of love
• Understand their own feelings and have the ability to analyze why they feel a certain way
• Begin to place less value on appearance and more on personality

Sexual Development
Most teens ages 13 to 17 will:
What Families Need to Do to Raise Sexually Healthy Adolescents
To help teens ages 13 to 17 develop as sexually healthy youth, families should:

- Clearly articulate your family and religious values regarding sexual intercourse. Express that, although sex is pleasurable, young people should wait to initiate sex until they are in a mature, loving, and responsible relationship.
- Express that we all have a variety of options for experiencing intimacy and expressing love.
- Discuss together the factors, including age, mutual consent, protection, contraceptive use, love, intimacy, etc., that you and your teen believe should be a part of decisions about sexual intercourse.
- Reinforce teens' ability to make decisions while providing information on which they can base those decisions.
- Discuss contraceptive options and talk about the importance of condom use. Discuss teens' options, should unprotected intercourse occur—including emergency contraception and STI testing and treatment. Discuss teens' options, should pregnancy occur, including abortion, parenting, and adoption.
- Discuss exploitive behavior and why it is unhealthy and (in some cases) illegal. Help youth identify various physical and verbal responses to avoid/get away from sexual situations that make them feel uncomfortable.
- Acknowledge that teens have many future life options, that some may marry and/or parent while others may remain single and/or childless.
- Use inclusive language that recognizes that some youth may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

Ages 18 and Over—What You Need to Know
Physical Development
Most young adults aged 18 and over will:

- Complete the process of physical maturation, usually attaining full adult height [Secondary sexual characteristics, such as size of penis and breasts, are completed.]
Cognitive Development
Most young adults aged 18 and over will:

• Move into adult roles and responsibilities and may learn a trade, work, and/or pursue higher education
• Fully understand abstract concepts and be aware of consequences and personal limitations
• Identify career goals and prepare to achieve them
• Secure their autonomy and build and test their decision making skills
• Develop new skills, hobbies, and adult interests

Emotional Development
Most young adults aged 18 and over will:

• Move into adult relationships with their parents
• See the peer group as less important as a determinant of behavior
• Feel empathetic
• Have greater intimacy skills
• Complete their values framework
• Carry some feelings of invincibility
• Establish their body image

Sexual Development
Most young adults aged 18 and over will:

• Enter into intimate sexual and emotional relationships
• Understand their own sexual orientation, although they may still experiment
• Understand sexuality as connected to commitment and planning for the future
• Shift their emphasis from self to others
• Experience more intense sexuality

What Families Need to Do to Raise Sexually Healthy Young Adults

To help young adults ages 18 and over develop a healthy sexuality, families should:

• Keep the lines of communication open and accept that the person is an adult, not a child.
• Offer choices, acknowledge responsibilities, and avoid dictates.
• Continue to offer physical and emotional closeness, but respect their need for privacy and independence.
• Appreciate them for their strengths and qualities.
• Facilitate their access to sexual and reproductive health care.
• Continue offering guidance and sharing values.

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