MASTURBATION

Masturbation in Early Childhood: Is It Really Normal?

Masturbation may be embarrassing to talk about, but it is very normal. Children’s bodies show signs of physical arousal from very early infancy. This arousal can happen during sleep or in response to being touched during diapering, bathing, or dressing. There is evidence that very young infants find the physical sensation emotionally pleasurable, and most children will learn how to create this feeling in themselves by age 4 or 5 years. By the age of 5 or 6 years, repeated intentional masturbation is very common. There is nothing harmful about masturbation. It does not cause physical or emotional problems, nor is it a sign of these problems. Try not to overreact when you see your child masturbating, as difficult as this may sound. Even though you may feel embarrassed or surprised when you see your child masturbating, avoid saying anything which might cause your child to feel guilty or fearful. Repressing children’s wish to masturbate, either through discipline, punishment, or disapproval, may cause them to feel badly about themselves or their bodies. What should you do?

Teach your child to limit this behavior to an appropriate time and place.

It is important to teach your child not to masturbate in public, since we live in a society where this is not accepted. When you see your child masturbating, gently and calmly remind your child to do that in privacy. Suggest appropriate times and places such as your child’s bedroom.

Assure yourself that your child’s behavior is not abnormal.

Remember that masturbation is very common and is not harmful physically or psychologically. However, you may have concerns that the frequency with which your child masturbates has increased. While many children masturbate frequently (several times a day), it often occurs when they are bored. They can usually be distracted easily with suggestions of other activities, such as going to the park, reading with a parent or caregiver, or playing with a friend. If you have worries or concerns about your child’s pattern or frequency of masturbation, please talk with your nurse practitioner or doctor, rather than worry or feel embarrassed.