

# Masturbation in Preschoolers

## DESCRIPTION

**Masturbation** is self-stimulation of the genitals for pleasure and self-comfort. Children may rub themselves with a hand or other object. **Masturbation** is more than the normal inspection of the genitals commonly observed in 2-year-olds during baths. During **masturbation**, a **child** usually appears dazed, flushed, and preoccupied. A **child** may masturbate as often as several times each day or just once a week. **Masturbation** occurs more commonly when a **child** is sleepy, bored, watching television, or under stress.

## CAUSE

Occasional **masturbation** is a normal behavior of many toddlers and preschoolers. Up to a third of children in this age group discover **masturbation** while exploring their bodies. Often they continue to masturbate simply because it feels good. Some children masturbate frequently because they are unhappy about something, such as having their pacifier taken away. Others are reacting to punishment or pressure to stop **masturbation** completely.

**Masturbation** has no medical causes. Irritation in the genital area causes pain or itching; it does not cause **masturbation**.

## EXPECTED COURSE

Once your **child** discovers **masturbation**, he or she will seldom stop doing it completely. Your **child** may not do it as often if any associated power struggles or unhappiness are remedied. By age 5 or 6, most children can learn some discretion and will masturbate only in private. **Masturbation** becomes almost universal at puberty in response to the normal surges in hormones and sexual drive.

## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

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

## COMING TO TERMS WITH MASTURBATION IN PRESCHOOLERS

1. **Have realistic goals.**

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

2. **Ignore masturbation at naptime and bedtime.**

Leave your **child** alone at these times and do not keep checking on him or her. Do not forbid your **child** from lying on the abdomen and do not ask if his or her hands are between the legs.

3. **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 or 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.

4. **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 to have you join us now." **Masturbation** should be tolerated at school only at naptime.

5. **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.

6. **Common mistakes.**

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.

Despite the myths and folklore attached to this aspect of human sexuality, rest assured that it is perfectly normal.

Children are highly tactile and extremely “feel good” oriented. When a child is learning about her body she will explore and will find the differences in touch. Your child is learning that just as a pinch on the arm hurts, massaging his genital area produces a pleasurable sensation. Even though it can be uncomfortable for parents to recognize their child as a sexual being, it is important to not suppress this healthy learning experience.

While you must not embarrass or shame your child, guidelines do need to be set. When you see your child “playing with herself” gently remind her that is something she needs to do in the privacy of her own room and encourage her to go there. Remind your child to wash his hands before and after due to the potential of infection to the genitals. Usually when given these reminders your child would much rather continue watching his favorite show on TV then to retire to his room.

However, if your child seems to be masturbating constantly it may be a sign of infection, stress or sexual abuse. It is important to keep the communication lines open and if you notice excessive masturbation talk to your child about why. Determine whether an issue such as a yeast infection is present (which can cause itchiness thus being relieved by rubbing) or if other factors are contributing to your child’s actions.

### **CALL YOUR CHILD'S PHYSICIAN DURING OFFICE HOURS IF:**

- Your **child** continues to masturbate when other people are around.
- You suspect that your **child** has been taught to masturbate by someone.
- You **child** tries to masturbate others.
- You feel your **child** is unhappy.
- You cannot accept any **masturbation** by your **child**.
- This approach does not bring improvement within 1 month.
- You have other questions or concerns.

For more information on raising sexually healthy children check out the following books:

[Keys to Your Child's Healthy Sexuality](#)

[Beyond the Birds and the Bees](#)