

Session 5: Building a Healthy Sexuality

NOTE: This Help Wanted session may be useful to people of any age. However, it was originally designed with adolescents and young people in mind. When we refer to sexual interest in "younger children" we mean younger than you if you are under the age of 18. If you are 18 or older, please interpret "younger children" as referring to anyone under the age of 18.

Introduction

Sexuality is an important part of life, and building a healthy sexuality can help you have good relationships with age-appropriate partners and a safe and fulfilling sex life.

In this session, we're going to talk about what sexuality is, how it develops, and how you can build a healthy sexuality.

You'll also hear from people who are attracted to children *and* building a healthy sexuality.

Sexuality

Sexuality is more than physical sexual activities. It includes your sex, gender, orientation, the characteristics you're attracted to, and the kind of relationships you want to have.

How Sexuality Develops

Sexuality begins developing even before you're born, and it continues developing and changing throughout your life. Each person's sexuality is unique, but we're all influenced by these factors:

- Biological factors: These are the genetic traits you were born with. They determine your sex and contribute to your gender identity.
- Psychological factors: These are the characteristics that shape your personality and play a role in what you're interested in sexually.
- Social and environmental factors: Things like culture, religion, parental upbringing, friends, and media send messages about how you should think and feel about sex and what are appropriate ways of expressing love and intimacy.

Though we know different factors influence sexuality, and sexual attraction can vary greatly, we don't really know all the reasons behind anyone's specific attractions.

Most people become aware of their sexuality and sexual attractions around puberty, when your body begins to mature physically and you experience emotional changes. Puberty typically happens between the ages of 8 and 15.

It can be surprising and scary to realize you're sexually attracted to children. In the following section, you'll hear people talk about realizing they are attracted to children.

What's Important to You?

An attraction to children doesn't define your entire sexuality, just as it doesn't define you as a person. You can be attracted to younger children, live a non-offending life, and have a healthy sexuality.

There are lots of characteristics you can be drawn to—personality, shared interests, a sense of humor, intelligence, loving behavior, and more!

Take a few minutes to think about your own sexuality, including your attractions and the kinds of sexual or romantic relationships you'd like to have.

What Is Important to Your Sexuality?

Answer the following questions to start thinking about what's important to you in building a healthy sexuality for yourself and your partners.

What are some characteristics of your sexuality? For example, what gender or genders are you attracted to, what physical traits are you drawn to, and what personality traits do you find attractive?

What kind of sexual relationships do you want to have and what's important to you in a relationship? For example, are you interested in casual or serious relationships? Is it important to you to have a partner who's caring or affectionate?

Taking time to think about what you're attracted to in others and what's important to you in relationships is a big part of developing a healthy and confident sexuality.

Healthy Sexuality

Building a healthy sexuality is a journey. Everyone has to learn about sex—what they like, how their bodies work, and how to talk to other people about sex. Sex can be awkward or funny sometimes, and that's OK!

Healthy sexuality makes you feel good about yourself, not guilty or regretful. Over your lifetime, you'll continue to learn about your sexuality, including what's important to you physically and emotionally, and how to be a respectful and caring partner.

In the following sections, we'll talk about specific ways you can build a healthy sexuality.

Building a Healthy Sexuality

The following sections discuss strategies for building a healthy sexuality.

- Accepting Your Sexuality and Attraction
- Masturbation
- Getting and Giving Consent
- Practicing Safe Sex
- Loving Yourself

Accepting Your Sexuality and Attraction

As we mentioned, an attraction to children doesn't define your entire sexuality. Accept your attraction for what it is and think about other aspects of your sexuality you can build on.

If you have any attraction to peers or adults, you can explore your sexuality with people your own age or older.

If you are attracted only to children at this time, it might be possible to identify elements of your attraction in age-appropriate partners. For example, you could look for a physical aspect such as small limbs or a personality aspect such as being curious about the world.

Your attraction to younger children might change over time—and it might not. Whether or not it changes, making the most of healthy relationships with peers can help meet the need for intimacy we all have.

Fact or Fiction?

People who are attracted to children can't have age-appropriate sexual relationships.

Answer

Fiction

People who are attracted to children may also experience attraction to peers or adults or be able to identify attractive aspects in age-appropriate partners and build healthy relationships. This can take effort and discipline and may not work for everyone.

Masturbation

Masturbation is completely normal and can be a way to release sexual feelings. It can help you become more comfortable with how your body works and what feels good to you. It's healthy to know what gives you pleasure, with or without a partner.

Some people use pornography when they masturbate. Viewing pornography that includes people who are or appear to be under the age of 18 is illegal and can have long lasting legal consequences. The making of child pornography harms children.

If you use legal pornography, look for content that shows realistic sexual relationships and experiences.

Fact or Fiction?

Masturbating can damage your genitals.

Answer

Fiction

It is extremely unlikely that you will damage your genitals by masturbating. You might feel sore if you masturbate often or for an extended time; lubricant can help.

Getting and Giving Consent

When you engage in sexual activity with people your age or older, you should talk specifically about what you and the other person are comfortable with and what you aren't comfortable with. This is true of all kinds of sexual activity—even kissing and making out—not just intercourse.

Here are some important things to keep in mind about consent:

- You or your partner can change consent at any time, even during sexual activity. If either of you become uncomfortable or unsure, stop and talk about it. Pay attention to physical cues that someone is uncomfortable, even if they said yes.
- Being under the influence of drugs and alcohol can make someone incapable of giving consent.
- Children are never able to give consent. Engaging a child in sex of any kind is harmful and illegal.

Fact or Fiction?

A partner has the right to say no even if they've had sex with you before.

Answer

Fact

Every person has the right to say no to sex, no matter what. Even if you've hooked up before, or even if you're in a relationship, both partners can say no or change their mind at any time.

Practicing Safe Sex

Healthy sexuality includes protecting yourself and your partners from unplanned pregnancy or parenthood and from sexually transmitted diseases. You and your partner should discuss protection before you start any sexual activity, but you are responsible for protecting yourself. Always insist on a condom, even if your partner says they don't like condoms or assures you that they are taking birth control pills or don't have any sexually transmitted diseases.

Fact or Fiction?

Sex doesn't feel as good when you wear a condom.

Answer

Fiction

Studies show that women *and* men enjoy sex just as much with condoms as without them, so don't go along with that argument.

Loving Yourself

Healthy sexuality includes having a positive self-image and a positive body image.

You are unique and valuable. Give yourself credit for your strengths and talents. Accept your body as it is and appreciate the pleasure it gives you. And if a partner is not kind or loving to you, find someone else.

Fact or Fiction?

I am unique and valuable, and the right person for me will appreciate my good qualities.

Answer

Fact

You should value yourself, and you deserve to be with someone who values you. If a sexual experience or relationship doesn't make you feel good about yourself, talk to a friend or a counselor about getting help or getting out.

Your Sexuality Over Time

Sexuality is personal and fluid. The same way your taste in music or food might change over time, your sexuality might change. For example, you might want to pursue deeper relationships, or you could realize a good sense of humor is sexy to you.

Your attraction to children might change—or it might not. Whether or not your attraction to younger children changes, you can build a healthy sexuality. In the following section, you'll hear from people who are doing just that.

This Is How It's Done

The following sections are three accounts of people building a healthy sexuality.

Building a Healthy Sexuality—One

When I first realized that I was attracted to children, I was around 14 years old. I hadn't had any kind of relationship before, and my sexuality was expressed solely through masturbation and fantasies about the girls I knew in my real life. In many ways I was no 'worse off' than any lonely child my age, just with a different object of focus for my sexual drive, which I hadn't yet realized the full extent of.

At college, I began to realize how isolated I felt. Although I struggled with greater questions of morality and fears of inadequacy, I continued my fantasies, often using stories from books or movies to give me scenes and stories that went beyond simple gratification to meaningful relationships. This was a great relief, and gave me an outlet that was healthy, fulfilling, and harm-free, while I began to accept my attraction.

While this outlet works very well for me, I have begun building a relationship with another adult. I do not have the same sexual desires for adults as I have for children, but I look at sex with my adult partner as a way of showing the emotional love I feel for them and my gratitude to them for their companionship. Though not every relationship with an adult I have attempted has worked, I do know that whatever happens I can build a healthy sexuality that satisfies my needs as a person alone or with another person.

Building a Healthy Sexuality—Two

Many pedophiles are attracted to adults as well as children, though the attraction to children is typically stronger. I am lucky enough to fit into this category. I was married for many years. For much of my married life, I had a healthy sex life. I enjoyed sex with my wife very much. I still had fantasies about children, but not while engaged in sexual activity with my wife. I never thought my sex life was as robust as the typical non-pedophile, but it was enough for me.

Building a Healthy Sexuality—Three

Everyone's sexuality is complex and multifaceted. It's very unusual to find someone who has no way at all of expressing affection, love, or sexuality, even if the sexual part remains a solo or mostly-solo act. And even if that's the case, you can still interact with other people emotionally and physically. A lot of us have relationships with adults that fulfill our needs and the needs of our partners to love someone and be loved back and to have physical care and attention.

My attraction to children is non-exclusive. This means that I have been able to pursue romantic and sexual fulfillment with adults even though I am more attracted to young boys. I've had a long-term relationship with an adult that's been pretty much successful.

To build a healthy sexuality, you can try to either refocus your fantasies to be just about adults (which is possible if you're non-exclusive) or, if you're exclusively attracted to children, refocus your sexuality/masturbation on just getting pleasure from your own body. The advantage of the latter is that it's free and you can do it any time and there are lots of safe ways to do it.

Conclusion

The more you learn about your own sexuality and communicating effectively with others about sex and relationships, the better your sex life and relationships will be, and the better you'll be able to avoid harmful sexual behavior.

It's important to never engage a child in sexual behaviors of any kind. Making the decision to never harm a child is an important step towards building a healthy sexuality.

Building a healthy sexuality is worth the effort, and there are lots of resources to help you. Please visit our [Resources page](#) for additional information.

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