

Masturbation

What is masturbation?

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.

Why does my child masturbate?

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.

How long does it last?

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.

Will masturbation cause problems later in life?

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.

How can I help my child?

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

When should I call my child's healthcare provider?

Call 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.
- Your 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.