How do we deal with explicit sexual behavior in preschool?

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RELATIONSHIPS

Two sisters, 4 and 9, are chattering in the tub together. In the next room, mom isn't paying much attention until she hears the word "sex." The younger one is saying, "He asked me to have sex with him."

The sisters giggle. Mom can barely breathe.

She's only 4 years old! screams inside her head. Where does this come from, she wonders in a rush. Where does it lead, what does it do to them, what should she *do*?

SHE REELS FROM the possibilities. Are there kids in the preschool engaged in explicit imitative behavior? Does this mean this boy has been exposed to sexual abuse and, by extension, her daughter is in jeopardy? Is this the 1997 developmental equivalent of playing doctor?

She quickly calls Kathy Roberts, director of the preschool her daughter attends, Dandelion Child Care in Cambridge, Mass. Roberts was surprised, but not shocked.

"I have never before heard these words in a preschooler's mouth," she said, "but I have seen a steady escalation of sex talk among children at the school. Talk about looking sexy, being sexy. It's bloodcurdling."

Roberts is not alone. Kay Stritzel Rencken, a kindergarten teacher in Tucson, Ariz., who leads parents' and professional workshops on children's sexuality, said that such talk among children would have prompted a referral to a social service agency five years ago. Today, she said, it's just the result of living in the world. "They hear it all," she said.

Four- and 5-year-olds, of course, don't know what they mean when they use, or hear, sexual words. That's good, but it's also bad.

"Whatever they hear, they want to make sense of," said early childhood educator Diane Levin, a professor at Wheelock College. "They bring it into their play and their talk. There's nothing wrong with that process, that's normal."

The problem is, no matter how hard they try to make sense of sexual information, they can't; cognitively, they just don't have the tools. It's like trying to read "Hamlet" when you haven't mastered "Cat in the Hat."

"It's exhausting for them," Roberts said. "Even worse, it takes energy away from the issues they should be working on." Because of their lack of understanding, experience and context, the messages they do absorb are confusing and scary.

Rencken said preschoolers have always been curious about body differences, pee and poop, and how a baby gets out of a mommy's tummy. That's normal, even healthy.

But for the first time in 25 years of teaching, Rencken said, "I'm hearing them ask how a baby gets in the tummy."

"What they need to figure out about being male and female is getting completely scrambled," Levin said.

Professionals also see more play divided along stereotypical gender lines. "It's hard to get girls to play with blocks and boys to go in the playhouse," Rencken said. Roberts sees more girls wearing nail polish and wanting to be "pretty."

THIS ALL COMES from many different places. Indeed, a high degree of sexuality has become such an accepted part of our culture that often we don't see its influence until it hits us in the face.

A mother describes waking up in a hotel room on vacation to find her daughter and son, 4 and 6, glued to a cable-TV channel watching a couple engaged in oral sex. A father watching football on TV blushes when a lingerie commercial for Victoria's Secret catches his preschooler's attention.

As if this isn't bad enough, our children's toys are among the worst culprits.

Levin, who researches the influence of toys and media on young children, said the past five years have seen a proliferation of toys for boys that are sexually grotesque. Spider-Man action figures, for example, include a female character whose exaggerated breasts have antennae coming out of them. A female Spawn figure has carved skulls for breasts.

"This tells boys that the female body is disgusting and sinister, and that sex and violence go together," Levin said.

Girls' toys, meanwhile, increasingly are stressing beauty and appearance. Cosmetic Castle, being marketed for this holiday season, offers a wide selection of "real-life" makeup; Special Night Barbie shows how to dress up for a night out.

The message girls get? "That what adults are doing is for them too," Levin said.

This affects 4- and 5-year-olds in significant ways. "By forcing them to deal with these issues, we rob them of their childhood," said Rencken, who is an adjunct professor at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, Calif.

At the least, Levin said, it affects their ability to develop positive relationships between the sexes. "At the worst, we are setting them up to be either violent or victim," she said.

A starting point for parents is to be more conscious of the effects toys and the media have, including the Internet. Levin's advice is not to buy action figures, for example, and to tell toy-store managers you don't like them, especially managers at superstores.

Rencken said to stay away from gender-specific toys, including color-coded ones. "Why does a girl need a pink bike, or a boy a blue one?" she asked.

Equally important is for parents and teachers not to keep quiet on the subject. "Parents think that by commenting on something, we bring it to a child's consciousness," Levin said. That's not true, she said. "It's already in their consciousness. By not commenting, we are saying, 'This is OK, this is normal.' "

When specific behaviors or questions come up, the mistake parents typically make is to flood a child with more information than he can handle, psychologist Fred Rothbaum said. "What he says may sound sophisticated and lead you to think he understands more than he does. That's a pitfall."

Rothbaum, a professor of child development at Tufts University, said the first thing to do when a child asks a question is to try to put it in context before you answer. For example, if the question is, "What is anal sex," ask him in as neutral a tone as possible, "What does that mean to you?" or, "Where di[illegible] you hear that?" What he says oft[illegible] can tell you what he wants to know.

When in doubt, Rothbaum said, set a limit: "That's a rude thing to say, just like it's rude to talk about farts at dinner." (If you are pressed to answer this particular question, Rothbaum suggests saying, "It's one of the ways adults sometimes hug.")

ANOTHER RULE of thumb is to stay calm. As upset as the mother of the girls in the tub was, she kept her cool. She described what she said:

"I asked them, 'What are you two talking about?' They said, 'Having sex.' 'What does that mean to you?' I asked. The 4-year-old said, 'Touching private parts.' That was more than I wish she knew, but I said that was a good definition, and reminded them about good and bad touching. I said, 'You both know that there's no touching private parts, right? It's your body.' 'Yes,' they said, and we moved on."

Roberts said that was just right. "You don't want to overreact. Keep your tone matter-of-fact."

"A child who isn't satisfied with your answer will ask another question," Rothbaum said.

Some suggestions for parents

- Go out of your way to expose your children to caring male-female relationships so they see a loving foundation for sex. Research shows children most likely to see sex as violent are boys with no positive male role models.
- Provide boys and girls with broad models of what it means to be male and female. Give them toys that don't promote stereotypical gender play; encourage girl-boy friendships.
- Constantly counteract media messages that show unrealistic body images by relating it directly to your child's experience: "Have you ever seen anybody with muscles like that?"
- When questions about sex come up, don't be dismissive or judgmental. Not, "That's not something you need to think about," but, "What does that mean to you?" A good general answer: "That's a grown-up behavior; it's not for children."
- When children ask her what sex is, this is the definition preschool director Kathy Roberts gives: "When grown-ups love each other, they express it by doing something called sex."
- Tell preschoolers who poke objects in each other's body parts that they can't do that, "It's not safe," and that if someone wants to do it they should say no.

Recommended reading: For 3- to 7-year-olds: "I Love You, Stinky Face" by Lisa McCourt (BridgeWater Books). A reassuring story of a mother's love.

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