It’s common to have a lot of questions about how to discuss children’s bodies and how to respond to their early interest in sexual play. Through supportive and thoughtful responses, parents can ensure their children learn to love and trust themselves, feel proud of their bodies, and build the foundation of healthy self-esteem.

1. **Talking about bodies**
   It’s a good idea to use anatomically correct names for bodies, including genitals. Children notice when only certain parts of their bodies receive special names (or aren’t named at all!) and this can cause confusion or shame. Proper terms for body parts may feel embarrassing for adults to use with children. But, if you use them when labeling children’s body parts right from the start, it becomes more natural when they’re old enough to ask questions. This strategy can also increase a child’s self-esteem and body autonomy (a sense of “ownership” of one’s own body). Teaching accurate names for body parts helps children learn that it’s okay to talk about their bodies. This gives them the words they would need to tell you about unwelcome advances or abuse.

2. **Forming gender identity**
   Gender identity is knowing yourself as a boy or a girl; a man or woman. (Over the past 10 years, gender identity has become more fluid, with broader definitions beyond these two categories.)
Sometime around 2 years old, most children begin to notice the physical differences between boys and girls. Over the next 2–3 years, your child will likely come to identify as either a boy or girl. For many children, these early gender roles may seem very rigid—a little girl refusing anything that isn’t pink or a boy thinking that a woman with short hair must be a man. This reflects children’s growing understanding of what it means to be a boy or girl. Their understanding will grow as they mature. Sharing stories about men and women in atypical roles, offering children a variety of toys to play with, and modeling respect for both sexes helps children to develop a deeper understanding of gender.

Toddlerhood is a period of exploration and imagination. Many children engage in playful dress-up activities and role-plays that may be associated with the opposite gender—like a boy pretending to be “Mom” or a girl pretending to be a construction worker. This behavior is quite typical and expected, and doesn’t mean that a child is gay or identifying with the opposite gender.

### When gender identity doesn’t line up with sex

Most children’s gender identity matches their biological sex—that is, a boy identifies as a boy. For other children, their gender identity does not reflect their biological sex. Children who are biologically boys may identify as a girl, and vice versa. Some children may identify with parts of both genders, or with neither. Our current understanding of gender is that it is a central part of your child’s being—it is not something you created, nor is it something you or your child can change. Think of gender identity as similar to having blue eyes or being right-handed. It’s not bad or good: It just is. Ask your pediatric care provider or HealthySteps Specialist if you have questions about gender identity. The most important thing for any child to know is that they are fully accepted and loved for who they are.

### What about sexual play and masturbation?

Body exploration is a normal and healthy part of child development for all children, boys and girls. In the first few years of life, children show interest in their own, as well as others’, “private” areas. Many babies discover their genitals and touch them, from infancy forward. Parents can either ignore this behavior (because it is quite normal) or simply state what is happening, “You found your penis!” or, “That’s your vulva.” Once children are older, it is appropriate to set limits on this behavior to teach privacy and boundaries. For example, teaching toddlers that touching their genitals should not happen in public is a good idea, as is teaching children that particular parts of the body are private and only parents, doctors, or the child can touch them. If children touch their genital in public, gently and calmly remind them that this activity is private.

Red flags that might suggest a reason for concern would be: not being able to stop touching their genitals, even when reminded; the child trying to involve others in the activity; the child experiencing injury or pain; or the child simulating adult sexual acts.

Aside from these extreme situations, masturbation is very common and is part of healthy development. Parents may feel embarrassed, surprised, or disturbed seeing their child exploring her body in this way. However, calm, matter-of-fact reactions allow children to continue their healthy development while learning about public and private behaviors, how to stay safe, and who is in charge of their body. Using punishment or conveying disapproval can cause children to feel badly about themselves or their bodies—and may teach them they can’t come to parents with questions about their bodies.