

# *Elba's little ABC of Sex Education*

A contribution to the development  
of healthy and well-functioning people



by Frida Nøddebo Nyrup

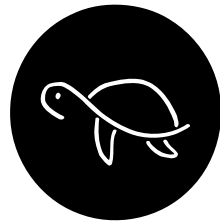
*Cand psych, associate professor of pedagogy and sexologist.*

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By Frida Nøddebo Nyrup

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By the same author:

*THE REASON for making room for children's sexual curiosity* (Nyrup 2022).

*Elbas lille ABC om seksualitet* (Nyrup, 2021).

*Elbas kleines ABC zur Sexualkunde* (Nyrup, 2020).

## Preface

During the 20 years I have worked in the day care world, I have experienced a natural curiosity in children, in relation to their body, their own and others' genitals. As adults, we should always act cautiously and naturally when communicating with children, both verbally and nonverbally. Because the curiosity that children have about their bodies and genitals is taboo, we, at best, overlook it by not interfering in their exploration and play, or by banning so-called "doctor games". We owe it to our children to enable them to have a healthy and natural relationship with their body and sexuality when they become adults.

In this book about Elba's experiences, Frida lends you a helping hand to read to and talk with your child about this important topic.

A book for both parents and professionals.

*Sally Schmidt*

*Former: Special Education Consultant, currently Stud. Educational Cand.*

### The book is structured in the following way

- It's an illustrated story for both children and adults, including information on sexual anatomy and examples of how children's curiosity about developing sexuality can be dealt with at home and in schools / nurseries.
- It contains questions that can be considered and discussed as well as be used for writing short written answers.
- A postscript for adults and older children presents different perspectives on sexual development - including a piece on potential consequences of challenging sexual development.

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## **How the book can be used**

In my experience, children of about three or four years old like having the book read to them, but they are not that interested in the four pages that deal with internal anatomy.

However, older children are interested in understanding the anatomical illustrations. Children who are beginning to read on their own will find the book easy to read, possibly in combination with an audiobook.

## **Key points from the postscript**

The postscript of the book provides a professional look at children’s need for space for their sexual development, which begins very early in life. Here it is important to note that children need to gain experience on their own, but at the same time need adult guidance, in the same way that we guide and teach children to be considerate and share toys. Therefore, adults must have a good sense of what is happening when children play.

We are naturally designed to be curious and to explore our own body and its capabilities. If, from an early age, we already have the idea that it is wrong or undesirable to be interested in our own genitals, this can turn into a persistent belief – often unconscious – of doing something wrong, which can be especially problematic during adolescence and adult life.

In addition, familiarity with sexuality does help protect against abuse, just like adult guidance can aid in the development of healthy and enriching sexuality.

Finally, studies show that well-informed sexually-confidential children and adolescents have a later sexual intercourse debut, fewer unwanted pregnancies, fewer sexually transmitted diseases, etc. This confidentiality about sexuality is established early in life (Hessling & Brockschmidt, 2015; Ninsiima et al., 2019).

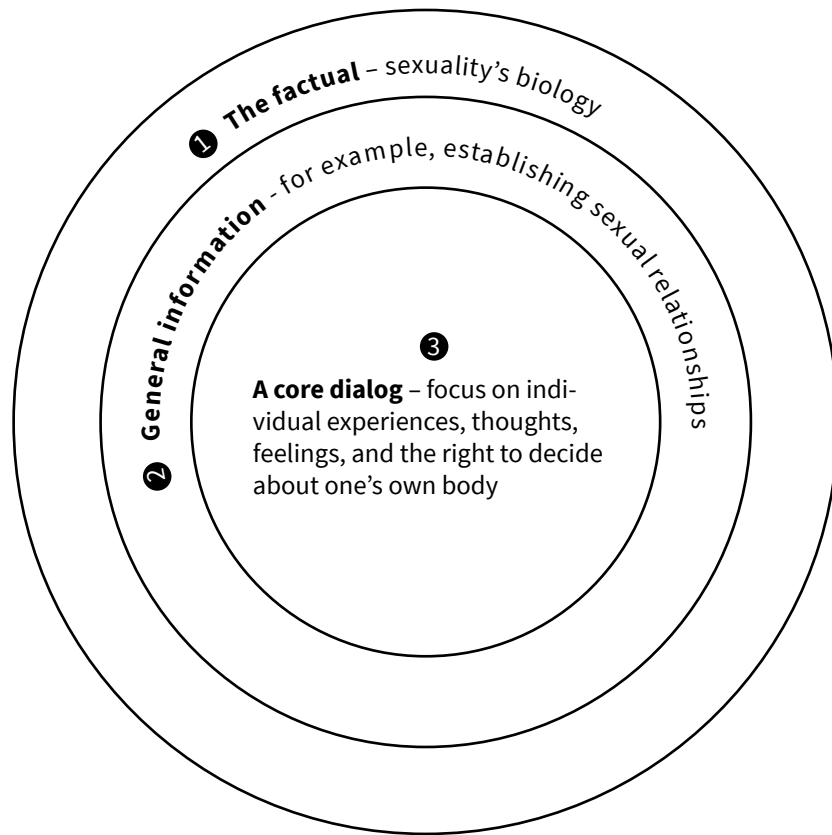
Several professionals have said that if a reader is slightly skeptical of the topic, it may be a good idea to start by reading the postscript, and in general, seeking out knowledge about children’s sexual and socio-sexual development.

Learn more about children’s sexual and socio-sexual development here:  
*THE REASON for making room for children’s sexual curiosity* (Nyrup, 2022).

## Breaking the stigma about men

As a society, we are challenged when we talk about men's and children's sexuality in the same context. Regarding this, I would like to mention the fact that I have chosen to let the main character of the book be a girl, and I have let the girl's father and a male teacher play some of the main roles. This relationship may surprise the adult reader, but it is important to me that I do not contribute to further stigmatization of men when we discuss sexuality and the support and guidance children need.

## The circle of dialogue: conversations about sexuality



The circle of dialogue illustrates different ways or levels to talk with children about sexuality.

We should enter into dialogue with our children about their sexual experiences. With small children who do not speak yet, the core dialogue is about showing acceptance, when children, for example, display joy when touching their genitals. As children get older, all the levels of the circle of dialogue can be used.

1. The outermost circle deals with the biology of sexuality. Depending on the child's age, you can also talk about reproduction, protection against pregnancy, STDs and similar things here.
2. The middle circle is about sexual relationships in general, including respecting other people's boundaries.
3. The inner circle is about core dialogue concerning individual experiences, thoughts, feelings and the right to decide over one's own body. An essential element of the core dialogue is recognizing the child's experiences.

Read more about the circle of dialogue in the book: *THE REASON for making room for children's sexual curiosity* (Nyrup, 2022).

## Child-friendly terms for genitals

Professionals around the world recommend the terms "penis" and "vulva", which I have chosen to support. Some people may find the words strange at first, but for children, the words are neutral and easy to pronounce.

The most important thing is that we give children words that they can use in conversations about their genitals, without feeling wrong or ashamed. In several English-speaking countries, girls do not have appropriate words to use for their genitals.

I wish you an enjoyable reading experience and remind you that the book is not a final solution – it is an attempt to inspire conversations and help us all move in a better direction. So, talk to your neighbor about this taboo subject; it is only together that we can achieve healthier sexual and socio-sexual development of our children.

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It is important that the adult knows, when discussing sexuality with children, that their sensory-based sexuality is significantly different from adult's sexuality.

We do not protect our children by not talking about their sexual experiences! We protect them by making them knowledgeable of themselves.

We need to teach our children how to say "yes" and "no", and how to interpret the signals from others correctly.

Sexuality develops gradually, and people with abusive behavior have also been children once.



Creating healthy and well-functioning children is easier to do than to remedy problems when they have grown up.



Elba wants to play Sophie's new game, and they start to sieve the sand in the sandpit. They talk about trying to pour the sieved sand over their vulvas. They are having a lot of fun and agree that they are very good at coming up with ideas. "Then we are idea-makers," says Sophie. "Yes, we have an idea-making club," Elba agrees.

John passes by the sandpit and gets curious. "What are you doing?" he asks. "We are making lots of sieved sand," the girls reply in a chorus. "Lots of sieved sand!" "We want to use it for something secret that we have invented," says Sophie. Then John becomes even more curious. He keeps asking the girls questions until they tell him what they want to use the sieved sand for.





They then agree that John can join the action. "This way, we will know if your penis is sensitive and ticklish the way our vulvas are," says Elba. Elba and Sophie make John pull out his penis, and then they tickle it with a feather.

John likes it because it tickles nicely. Elba grabs his penis to see if it can get any longer. John cries: "Don't do that!" Suddenly, both Elba and Sophie want to examine his penis, and it gets jerked a little too violently. Sheldon senses that something is wrong.



John gets upset and runs away.  
Elba and Sophie are left in the sandpit feeling a bit sorry.

"Why didn't John like it?" Elba asks.

"It is strange too because the game was just getting funny," says Sophie.

"I don't like it when John gets upset," says Elba.

Elba and Sophie agree that they will be sad if John is mad at them.



John reappears with Anton.

Elba and Sophie are worried, sensing they have done something wrong.

Elba hugs Sheldon. A stuffed toy like Sheldon is especially good when you are feeling bad.

Anton says they need to talk about how to play so everyone feels comfortable.

He asks Elba and Sophie if they can remember talking about how it is okay to say STOP.

"But John never even said STOP," says Sophie.

Elba backs up Sophie and says: "No, all John said was: 'Don't'".

Anton says, "I think you all know that don't also means STOP."

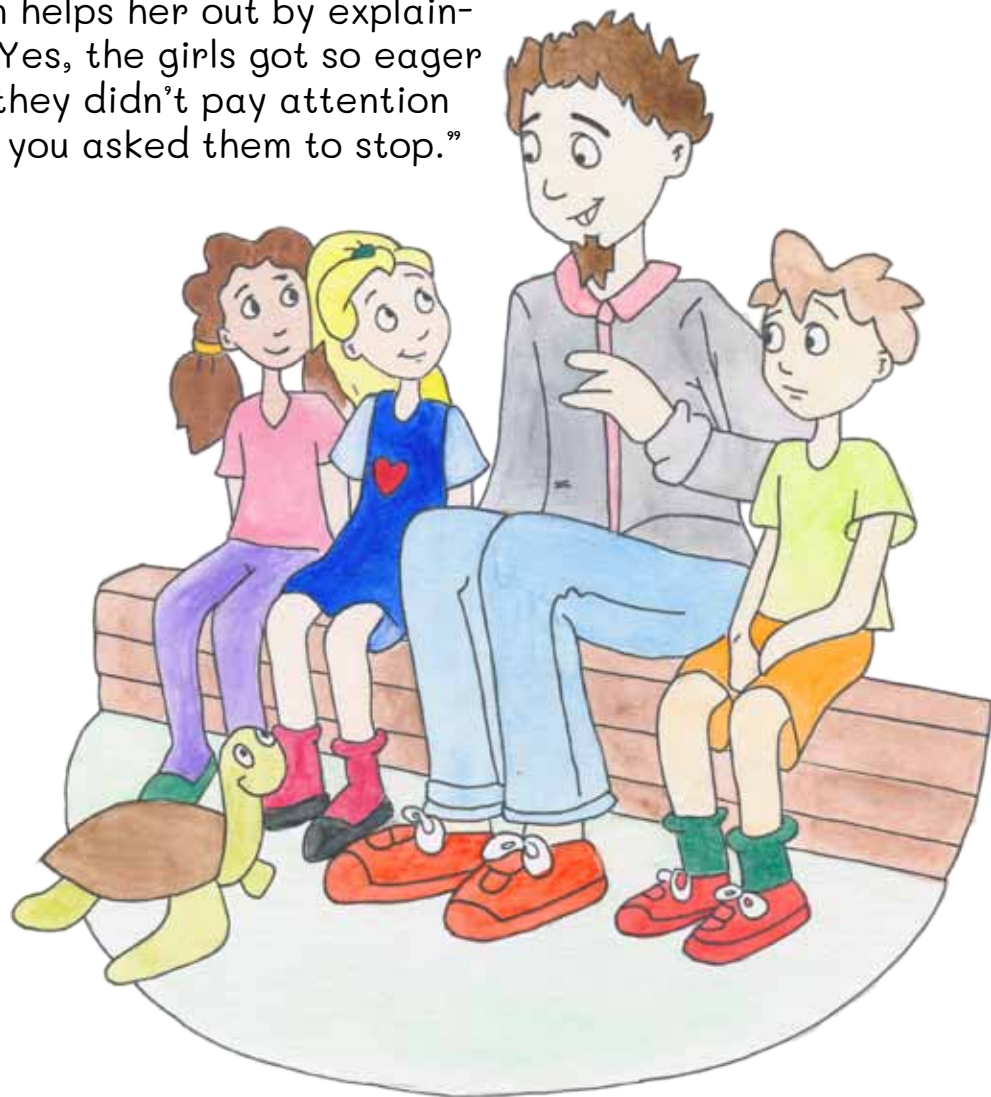


"It is important that you always listen to what the person you are playing with is saying," Anton continues. "If you are uncertain about how the other person is feeling, you must ask them.

And if you forget, then it is important that you say sorry." Anton asks the girls if they have something they want to say to John.

Yes, they do, and Sophie says, "I am sorry, John."

Anton helps her out by explaining: "Yes, the girls got so eager that they didn't pay attention when you asked them to stop."



Elba apologizes too and says: "I promise to listen carefully next time anyone says don't - or something similar."

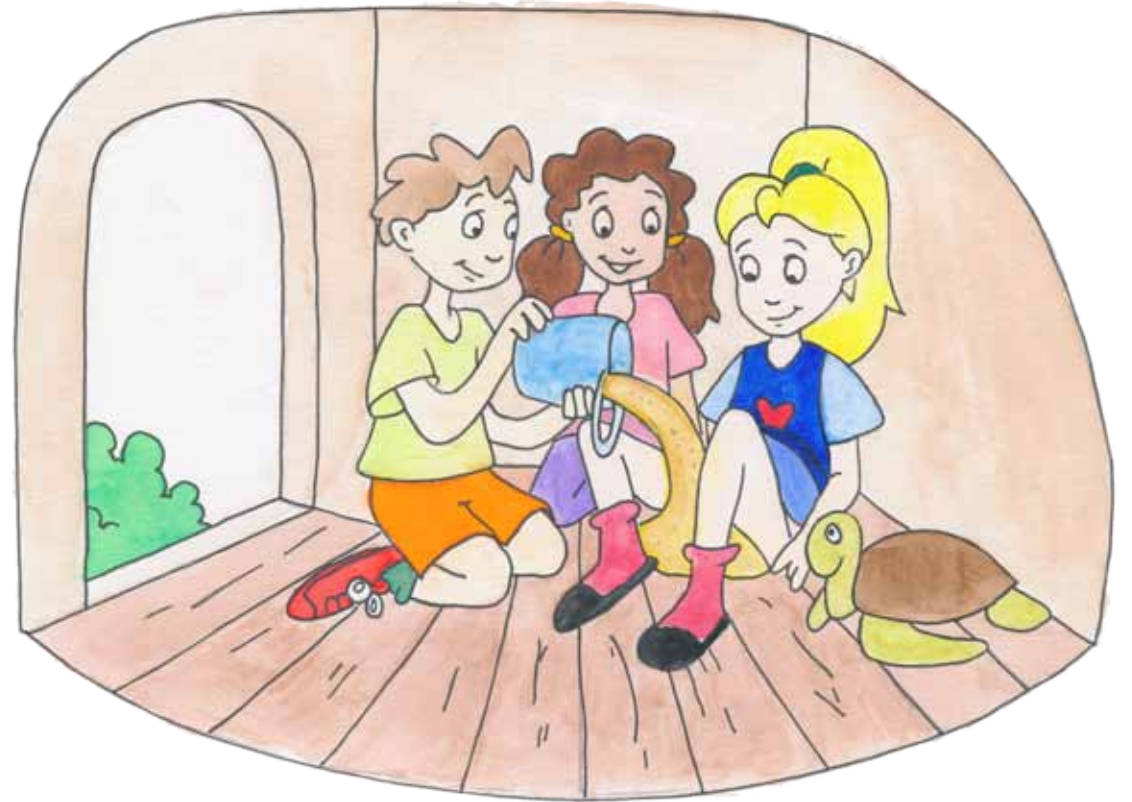
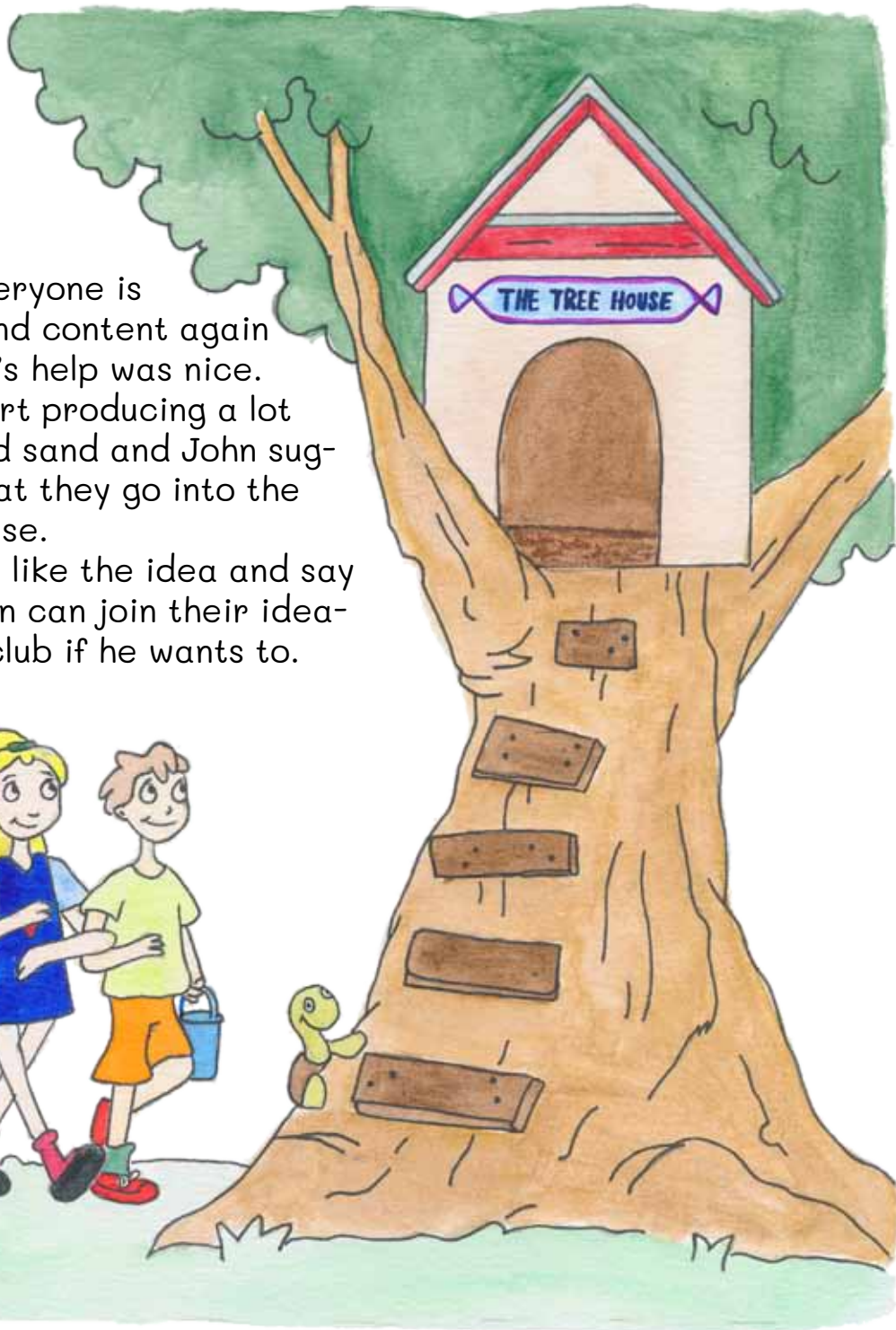
The girls say they'd like to play with John again.

"What do you think, John?" Anton asks. "Do you want to play again?"

Yes, John wants to play.

Anton suggests that it is a good idea to go into a playhouse or a pillow room if you want to look at penises and vulvas. It is a private matter. Not everyone needs to have a look.

Now, everyone is happy and content again — Anton's help was nice. They start producing a lot of sieved sand and John suggests that they go into the tree house. The girls like the idea and say that John can join their idea-making club if he wants to.



They enter the tree house, and start to pour the sieved sand on each other. It feels nice! It probably tickles just as much on John's penis as it does on the girls' vulvas.

# Postscript

The postscript builds upon a research-based and peer-reviewed article: *Vores seksualitet udvikles gradvist – også i barndommen* (Nyrup, 2019) and upon a book: *THE REASON for making room for children's sexual curiosity* (Nyrup, 2022).

## A part of development that we must take seriously

Children's sexual development is just as important as every other part of development. It is natural for us to help our children keep their balance while they learn to ride a bike, to teach them how to handle the loss of a teddy bear, and we rhyme with them when they become fascinated with the ingenuities of language. We should be able to support children in their sexual development, in the same manner. This development begins at a very early age.

## Sexuality during childhood is different from sexuality during adulthood

Children's sexuality is entirely different from that which we typically experience as adults. To put it briefly, children's sexuality is solely a physical / sensual phenomenon. The child's sexuality gradually develops into adult sexuality, which is characterized by psychical advancement in the form of, for example, sexual fantasies and the fact that we can become sexually aroused solely through the power of thought. Adult sexuality at its best is also characterized by the ability to manage one's sexuality in ways that are acceptable in society.

Children, through their activities and play, are in the process of learning about their own bodies and sexuality. They can enjoy physical pleasure by stimulating their genitals. Some children, at a very early age, become aware of the fact that it can be relaxing to masturbate and can find their own preferred ways of stimulating themselves.

## The role of the brain and the nervous system in the development of sexuality

All human development is about the development of the nervous system and therefore the brain. The nervous system is far from finished developing when we are born but continues to develop dependent on the experiences we have. When we have become capable of keeping our balance - even when we shift the weight of our bodies, for example, by reaching out for something - it is because we have trained and developed our nervous system to be able to react and make sure that the muscles that keep us upright can correct our position through small adjustments. Eventually, we develop psychical functions such as, for example, the ability to postpone a need, learning to deal with critique, or learning to say, "never mind". It is natural to us, and

therefore, we only truly notice our nervous system when it does not develop adequately. There is a vast number of known functions that do not develop adequately because of a lack of stimulation. Brains can be compared to muscles: they develop through use and regress with inactivity. An example is a "lazy eye", which refers to a type of blindness that typically arises because the brain "chooses" not to use the eye that squints, due to the fact that it is distracting to integrate different inputs from each eye.

How we use the body, and the experiences we have with physical, psychological, and social elements, are therefore crucial for the development of the nervous system, and likewise the development of sexuality. We know that there has to be a consolidation of sense-based sexuality and the advancements that characterize adult sexuality. For example, the response from the child's caretakers is crucial for how the child's nervous system develops and organizes itself in the future.

### **The importance of acknowledging children**

For the nervous system to develop adequately, children need reactions from their caretakers. From the age of 10-12 months, children begin to use the reactions from adults to navigate in the world. In a sense, a child uses adults to find out what is good, what is dangerous etc.

*The Still Face Experiment*, which is carried out by Edward Tronick, shows clearly how children are naturally instilled with the need to seek out reactions from close caretakers, and I recommend watching this small video (Tronick, 2009) <sup>1</sup>.

This shows how children interpret what they encounter, based on the reactions of adults. If a child detects that parents are insecure during a thunderstorm, then the child also becomes insecure when there is thunder. Especially when repeated, the adults' reactions remain as lasting emotional markers in the child. If we return to the example of thunderstorms, then the child may build up such strong feelings of insecurity during thunderstorms that it can be difficult for the child to deal with emotions during them.

Something similar can happen in regard to the reactions that children get to their sexual activities. We should, for example, acknowledge that it is enjoyable to touch

1. Tronick, E. (2009). Still Face Experiment: Dr. Edward Tronick. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0>

one's own genitals, but over time, as the children begin to understand it, they should also learn under which circumstances such behavior is appropriate.

In children's play with each other, we need to guide them. It is natural that children overstep each other's boundaries. This is the case when they play in the sandbox and take another person's shovel, which they have just seen, or push aside another person to get their way. During play, when children explore their own and other's sexuality, they are naturally going to overstep each other's boundaries. Here the role of the adult is to make it clear that playing itself can be completely okay, but that the actions of the child were not accepted by the other participant. At the same time, the child also needs to know how they are allowed to act.

It is also our duty to teach children how to interpret the signals from the other participant, especially in cases when "no" has not been said directly. Children need to learn to make sure that the playmate agrees to play and is not feeling pressured to participate.

In summary, we can say that children gradually need to learn what is socially acceptable, just like they gradually develop sexuality where their senses are being combined with the feelings that arise in connection to sexual experiences. We as adults can make a difference and prevent unfortunate sexual development. As with many other circumstances in the area of sexual and psychical behavior, sexually abusive behavior is usually something that develops gradually. Nobody is born to be aroused by committing sexual assault.

### **Culturally we carry a non-acknowledging baggage**

A currently over-sensitive culture makes it challenging for many adults to respond to children's emerging sexuality.

A study showed that nearly all mothers smile at their child when the child smiles at them. At the same time, the study showed that most of us ignore it or look away when our children notice and become interested in their genitals.

The fact that many of us look away, or rush to give a diaper on, might be related to our insecurity or negative perception of sexuality. It is usually something that we ourselves have acquired through the culture in which we grew up. We should not be ashamed of this. Instead, we should individually try to do better than previous generations. We should acknowledge our children's desire to get to know their own

bodies. As the children become older, we need to acknowledge their urge to play with other children and ensure a balance, where on one hand we do not disturb their play and, on the other hand, make them feel that we are at ease on the sideline, and will talk with them about what is happening when they play. This is how we as adults get in touch with what is happening during play, and children feel safe by being able to potentially get help or ask adults for advice.

### **What impact does it have if children are not acknowledged?**

When we need to do better, it is because it can be unfortunate to ignore, look away, distract, or perhaps meet with disapproval a child touching his or her genitals. It can hinder the child in feeling and learning to regulate their sexual feelings. Especially with recurrences, this can mean that the child henceforth will be influenced by the shame that is associated with distancing. Alternatively, the child may try to suppress their sexual impulses which, due to their perception of the adult's reaction, become something unwanted.

### **The sexuality of childhood impacts adulthood**

About 100 years ago, Freud pointed out the connection he believed he could trace between reactions to childhood sexual experiences and the adult sexuality / mental illnesses such as neuroses later in life.

Today we know much more about the development that takes place from the sense-based sexuality of childhood to sexuality as an adult.

There is still a need for research into the area, but it is agreed that a lack in acknowledgment of the sexuality of childhood can have a negative impact on adult sexuality. This can take the form of a lack of ability to feel arousal, lack of ability to orgasm, low interest in sexual contact, risky sexual conduct, and the development of sexuality, which can be in opposition to acceptable / legal sexual conduct.

### **It is a human right to learn how to enjoy one's sexuality**

The "establishment" has historically wanted to control who had children with whom. Up until the end of the 1800s, the church had control and did, for example, try to suppress sexuality. This included referring to masturbation as physically harming. The church has, in some places and during some periods, even claimed that sexuality was solely acceptable for fertilization, and that pleasure preferably should not be

associated with the act.

Today we know that masturbation is a healthy sexual activity, and it is important to make room for, and take care of, children's sexual development. This is one of the ways that we can create healthy and well-functioning people with the ability to enjoy their sexuality, regardless of whether they are children or adults.

**It would be desirable if we could all give an appropriate answer when, for example, a three-year-old child has discovered the body and says: "Oh, it is so nice to stroke my vulva, just before I go to sleep."**

Sexual development take place primarily during childhood and adolescence: thoughts, fantasies, emotional relationships, social and culturally determined norms / understandings are coupled-with the physical-sexual events.

The physical-sexual events are, for example, that you several times during the course of a day spontaneously get erections of respectively the penis and clitoris or an event can be playing with other children.

At bedtime, the child will typically let thoughts and perhaps fantasies about the day's events unfold.

Here it seems that couplings can occur, because there along with thought activity is enough stillness to feel the body's reaction during spontaneous erections, which can also "invite" self-stimulation.

The couplings typically occur through highly emotional experiences, that are thought about often during a period of time.

The fact that it is thoughts that arise frequently over a period of time means that the couplings are strengthened by repetition.

(Mitchell, 2021).

## Thanks to

This book has been created as an extension of work with the mandatory educational module “Gender, sexuality and diversity” at The Faculty of Education and Social Sciences at UCL University College, Denmark.

I would like to thank the administration at UCL University College for their support in making this children’s book, and the research-based and peer-reviewed article (Nyrup, 2019), as well as the textbook: “*THE REASON for making room for children’s sexual curiosity* (Nyrup, 2022), which form the theoretical foundation for this book.

I also want to thank the students who have eagerly participated in discussions, helped collect data and contacted institutions as well as generously made themselves available for interviews with very personal questions about their sexuality.

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**Creating healthy and well-functioning children is easier to do than to remedy problems when they have grown up.**

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