

preschooler



nude awakening

Some kids want to bare all, and (gulp) compare with their friends. *by* JOANNA NESBIT

When Kate Truman arrived at preschool one afternoon to pick up her 4-year-old daughter, the teacher took Truman aside to tell her that Rachel and her buddy Jasper had gotten sidetracked while playing dress-up. (Names have been changed to protect the innocent.) She'd found them comparing anatomy. "It's not a big deal, but it might be good to talk to her about privacy," the teacher said. "And I'll keep a closer eye on them."

Although the teacher was diplomatic, Truman was embarrassed. Was this behavior normal? Experts offer insights into why kids like to "play doctor" and prescribe the best ways to handle it.

personal details

Developmentally, preschoolers are paying closer attention to hair length, skin color, and other body differences. Not all kids will actually take off their clothes to inspect, but an interest in

peers' anatomy is typical at this age, explains Justin Richardson, M.D., clinical professor of psychiatry at Cornell and Columbia universities. "It's also normal for siblings and same-sex friends to be curious about each

other, which can come up in situations like bathing together or changing into swimsuits.” On the other hand, playmates may strip down over and over to put on costumes and not even notice each other’s body at all.

innocent actions

Three- and 4-year-olds are developing an understanding of gender, and they may have clear-cut ideas about roles, such as boys play with certain kinds of toys and girls wear dresses, but they have no concept of sexuality.

If your child has observed how his friend’s private parts compare with his own, there’s no need to panic—the only thing this interest indicates is a healthy curiosity. It’s possible that a boy might spontaneously get an erection, which is normal. Preschool boys can get erections from anything that arouses the nervous system—something as innocuous as taking off clothes or experiencing a change in temperature. “At this age, they don’t indicate sexual attraction or fantasy,” says Dr. Richardson.

graceful response

Should you come across your preschooler with another child in a state of undress, try to keep calm. Reacting in a way that communicates anxiety or disapproval may inadvertently shame the kids. Simply redirect them by saying something diversionary like “Who wants some grapes or strawberries?” and remind them to get dressed. However, don’t worry if you couldn’t help but seem shocked, says Dr. Richardson. You can always revisit the issue later with your child when you’re feeling more calm and collected.

You can also acknowledge your child’s interest by saying, “I see you are curious about bodies. In our family, we keep our clothes on when we have visitors.” You might want to follow up with a trip together to

your local library to get some age-appropriate books for her about bodies, so she can learn more.

setting boundaries

Now’s the time to establish (or reestablish) playdate rules, such as keeping doors open and clothes on during dress-up, says child-development expert Betsy Brown Braun, author of *Just Tell Me What to Say: Sensible Tips and Scripts for Perplexed Parents*. “These situations are good opportunities to begin teaching respect for others,” says Braun, including the importance of honoring someone’s personal space by not touching her body and by not letting that person touch yours.

Using correct anatomical terms and answering questions matter-of-factly will facilitate open communication with your child and pave the way for frank discussions about bigger topics when she’s older.

Although you can begin talks about privacy, that’s still an abstract concept to preschoolers, adds Deborah Roffman, a sex and family-life educator in Baltimore and author of *Talk to Me First*. “Children don’t adequately understand the concept of privacy until age 5 or 6, but at 3 and 4 they are beginning to understand the concept of rules.” Just as you might teach your preschooler to knock on the bathroom door before entering, you can remind her to keep her clothes on when friends come over to play or when she’s in public, and that some parts of her body are more private than others.

Be prepared for some confusion and questions if your kid and her pal like to get naked together and don’t immediately understand when you explain that they can’t. Having a candid chat with your child about boys’ and girls’ body parts and the differences between them may satisfy some of her natural curiosity—maybe even enough to motivate her to keep her shirt and shorts on. 😊