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## Bathing and Showering: Privacy Concerns

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If you are like many parents, you may have questions about the sexuality issues related to bathing and showering your children. Maybe you find it convenient to bathe your young children together, or perhaps you enjoy taking leisurely baths and showers with them yourself. But probably around the time your children turn four to six years of age, you might start to worry whether or not these innocent shared baths and showers are still appropriate.

### Sexual Curiosity

During the preschool years, siblings, whether they are of the same or different sex, may "check out" each other's bodies in the bathtub. If you come upon your children showing each other their genitals, try to take a relaxed attitude. Take off your adult lenses. These are not two adults in a hot tub! They are two children who are displaying normal curiosity about their bodies.

Instead of reacting negatively or ignoring the situation, you can use it as a teachable moment. You could say something like, "I see you both are curious about how your bodies are different. Steve is a boy, and he has a penis and a scrotum. Susie is a girl, and she has a vulva and a clitoris. I have a book about bodies that we can look at together at bedtime." You might also add, "Aren't bodies great? But they belong to each of us, and I don't want you to touch each other's private body parts."

### Bathing with Parents

Baths with a parent often present a similar opportunity to talk about appropriate touching. Some parents become uncomfortable when their preschooler starts to be interested in the differences between male and female bodies, or children's and adult bodies, or when the child tries to touch Mom or Dad's breasts or genitals. This, again, is normal curiosity; there is nothing wrong with it. But it is up to you as a parent to set limits: "Those parts of our body are private, and I'm uncomfortable with you touching my breasts (or vulva or penis)."

In addition, simply teaching your child how to wash his own body reinforces this sense of ownership: "You wash your own penis and scrotum because that's a private part of your body." You also can talk about the differences between adults' bodies and children's bodies. For example, you might say to your son, "Your penis will grow longer like Daddy's when you are a grown-up," or to your daughter, "You will get hair on your vulva when you are a teenager and your body starts to change into an adult's."

### **Take Cues From Your Children**

In the next few years, your children are likely to become more private about their bodies, and they will probably let you know that they are not comfortable bathing together anymore. Pay attention to clues such as being unwilling to undress in front of each other, resisting bath time, or seeming embarrassed; this is a signal that the time for shared baths has come to an end. And if you find that you are uncomfortable bathing or showering with your children before they are, you can simply tell them "Now that you're growing up, it's time for you to bathe alone"--and then just stop.

Karen Deerwester, Ed.S. - Parent Educator and Early Childhood Specialist, founder and CEO of Family Time, Inc., and consultant. In 17 years of classes, seminars, and one-on-one coaching, Karen has supported thousands of parents in their efforts to build great foundations for children. Karen is uniquely committed to helping parents become problem solvers in the large and small questions that arise "living with children."

### **Showering with Dad**

Question: I have a 2-year-old daughter who loves to take showers with her Daddy. At what age does it become inappropriate for a little girl to shower with her father?

Answer: The answer is... it becomes inappropriate when either Dad or child starts to feel uncomfortable with the situation. Showering with Dad is perfectly all right at this age. In a few months, your daughter may begin to notice Dad has body parts that are different than hers. Be prepared to answer her questions and give the correct names of the body parts. Dad may even want to think of his response should your daughter want to touch his private parts. That will present a perfect opportunity to explain to your daughter where a person may and may not touch another person. Usually, a good answer, that explains the concept of "private" in concrete terms, is anything that is covered by a bathing suit is "private". We do not "play with" or "tickle" another person on those places.

The time to stop showering together will always be relative to beliefs about nudity and attitudes about our bodies. Each family is different. Some people are not comfortable around nudity at any age while others don't have a second thought about it. Some signals that things are changing are: if Dad begins to feel self-conscious, if your daughter begins to show a little embarrassment, or if your daughter's behavior becomes overly silly and preoccupied with the nudity. But as long as it seems natural and easy, it is.

Karen Deerwester, Ed.S.

## How Private Should Parents Be?

Question: At what age (or stage) should parents be careful that their children don't see them naked, particularly children of the opposite gender? And is there any general wisdom about when parents should teach children to be more private about their own bodies? Thank you.

T.F., Naperville

Answer: This is one of those issues that is to some extent culture specific, so we emphasize that we are limiting the scope of our answer to our own culture.

It is not necessary for parents of the same sex as the child to conceal their nakedness from the child in appropriate contexts, such as changing clothes or showering. In our culture children will grow up seeing members of their own sex naked in locker rooms, camp cabins, the military, etc. Children would be confused and potentially made uncomfortable later if the same-sex parent went to great lengths never to be seen naked by the child.

Parents do need to be prepared to answer questions such as, "Why don't I have breasts like yours?" The best answers are simple and matter-of-fact. "You will when you grow up. You'll grow up to look just like me."

On the other hand, we recommend that children over three be spared from seeing the opposite-sex parent naked or both parents naked together. The child at this age is entering what we call the romantic phase. The child realizes that although the parents love and care for the child, that the parents also have a special and enjoyable relationship that excludes the child. The child reacts to this perception by wanting the special attention the opposite-sex parent bestows on the same-sex parent. When the child fails to attract the opposite-sex parent's social attention, the child blames the same-sex parent and then becomes concerned that the same-sex parent will perceive this anger and retaliate.

This is an emotionally charged time in development, and seeing the opposite-sex parent naked will be very over stimulating and make it more difficult for the child to accomplish the developmental task at hand: to accept the child's role in the family, which means accepting that the child will never get the same social attention from the opposite-sex parent that the same-sex parent enjoys.

As to your second question, children younger than three can not understand the notion that parts of their body are private and should be off-limits to others any more than they can really grasp that cars can hurt them or electrical outlets can shock them. Children over three can understand that their body has private parts and that it is important to tell their parents if anyone tries to touch them there.

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