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## How to Teach Your Military Child About Healthy Boundaries

The concept of personal boundaries is one of the most important concepts you can teach your children so they can grow up to have happy, healthy relationships. Plus, learning about healthy personal boundaries as a young child lays the foundation for understanding consent as a teen.

### Not sure what's "normal" sexual behaviors for growing children?

Learn more about common – and healthy – behaviors in children, so you know what to expect and how to help them.

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Boundaries can refer to a number of physical and emotional guidelines you establish for yourself. Physical boundaries can include the physical space between you and another person, the comfort you feel with physical touch, and the way you share and respect another person's belongings. Emotional boundaries include unspoken rules of how you treat or speak to someone and how you expect to be treated in return. Emotional boundaries also allow us to identify and separate our needs, wants, opinions and emotions from others. Boundaries are healthy when we have identified our limits, we are confident with our choices and opinions, and we are able to stand up for ourselves when necessary if what is acceptable is threatened.

How do you lay the foundation for boundaries and consent with young children? First, you have to teach them about healthy boundaries. Healthy boundaries are not too rigid (where we refuse to listen and grow), nor are they too loose (when we can't say no to others or allow others to define what is right for us even if it feels wrong to us). Everyone has the right to set limits with others about what they do and don't want to happen. For young children, boundaries and consent begin with asking for permission and understanding they, too, can expect to be asked for consent in return.

The best way for military families to show children healthy boundaries is to model it themselves – both with your children and with other adults. Here's a list of some common ways you can help your children learn to build this resilient skill in everyday family life.

- **Respect the spoken "yes" and "no."** Clear communication is the foundation to teaching healthy boundaries and asking for permission. Help them practice saying yes or no in certain situations, rather than relying on body language alone. That way, children won't just assume a behavior that makes them uncomfortable is okay or that it's "rude" to refuse unwanted contact.
- **Ask for permission before offering physical affection.** Touch should not be an automatic right for anyone – family, friend or stranger. Like adults, children can decide who they'd like to hug, high-five or hold their hand without repercussion. For example, a child may choose not to high-five a stranger's hand at the grocery store, even if an accompanying adult thinks it's polite to do so.
- **Offer small choices for decisions which impact them.** By offering your military children the chance to make their own decisions within reason, you'll show respect for their personal right to decide for themselves. Questions like "It's time to get dressed – would you like the red or blue shirt?" or "Do you want oatmeal or eggs for breakfast?" are easy ways to do this for young children without overwhelming them.
- **Reinforce the idea that rules and healthy boundaries go both ways.** Boundaries that your military child may enforce for themselves can also exist for others, including fellow playmates. For example, Tommy has the right to tell Mary to stop pushing him because that's crossing his personal boundaries. Mary can tell Tommy to stop pulling her ponytail as well, because she has boundaries, too. As an adult, you can help children to understand that boundaries apply to everyone, and different people may have different types of boundaries.
- **Talk about "gut feelings."** You'll need to explain that sometimes people get a weird feeling that something isn't right, even if they're not sure why. They should trust that inner voice, because that's an instinct we all have to keep us safe. That gut feeling might help them avoid a suspiciously friendly stranger, for example.

By modeling consent and respect for personal boundaries, you can help your military child stay safe as they actively seek secure relationships. And remember – Military OneSource is always able to [boost your MilParent power](#) by connecting you to military programs and support designed especially for military parents, like the [New Parent Support Program](#), the [Military and Family Life Counseling Program](#) and [Thrive](#).

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## Healthy Sexual Behaviors in Children

The birds and the bees. It can be a tough conversation for any parent to have with their children. Rather than avoiding it, prepare early by understanding the childhood stages of healthy sexual growth. Understanding their development stages can better prepare you for “the conversation” and any questions they may ask you about gender, sexuality and relationships along the way.

Military OneSource is here to arm you with the facts on healthy sexual behaviors in children to help you power up your parenting. The more you know, the more you can be the best guardians of your military children’s safety and well-being. Providing children with accurate, age-appropriate information is vital to raising safe and healthy children. To that end, we’ve assembled a list of healthy sexual behaviors in children and resources you can consult if your child demonstrates concerning sexual behavior.

### Healthy sexual behaviors in children – takeaways for military parents

All children develop sexually beginning at a very early age. Sometimes it can be hard to know which child behaviors are normal and which are concerning. The [National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth](#) has looked at the research, and we’ve distilled the common behaviors by age for you.



#### 0 to 2 years old – Infant to Toddler

Common and expected healthy child behaviors for infants and toddlers 0 to 2 years old:

- Curiosity about their body, including genitals
- Touching their genitals in public and in private
- Removing clothes and wanting to be naked

To encourage healthy development, parents can:

- Teach children the correct names for body parts ("penis," "vagina," etc.) and avoid using other terms which may confuse them.
- Explain the basic anatomical differences between a male and a female.
- Answer their questions in age-appropriate ways using simple, clear language.
- Begin to build your child's feeling vocabulary by describing all observed feelings, not just those you believe to be related to sexual development. For example, if you observe your child's anger or frustration, say "You seem angry that your sister doesn't want to play."

## 2 to 5 years old – Toddler to Kindergarten

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Common and expected healthy child behaviors for toddlers to young children 2 to 5 years old:

- Occasional masturbation as a soothing behavior, either publicly or privately
- Consensual and playful exploration of bodies with children of the same age, evolving to "playing house" or "playing doctor"
- Questions about sexuality or reproduction, like "Where do babies come from?" or "What makes girls different from boys?"
- Curiosity about adult bodies and expression of that curiosity in socially unacceptable ways, such as wanting to use the bathroom or shower with parents or touching a woman's breasts
- Continued lack of caring about nudity, including the occasional removal of clothes
- Use of slang terms for body parts and functions

To encourage healthy development, parents can:

- Start answering children's questions by asking them first what they think happens, then continuing the conversation with clear, age-appropriate information. For example, say "Babies grow in a mommy's uterus."
- Encourage a basic understanding of privacy and appropriate behavior in certain situations. For example, if a family member requests privacy in the bathroom or if someone does not want to be touched or hugged, teach your child to respect those requests.



- Introduce the idea of healthy boundaries by explaining the difference between a wanted and unwanted touch. Teach children about personal boundaries so they understand their body belongs to them and they may refuse touches – like a stranger’s or relative’s hug – they don’t want without getting in trouble or hurting someone’s feelings.
- Teach children about respecting others’ personal boundaries. Explain that it’s important to ask before touching someone else, because that person might not want to be touched.
- Support and encourage your child to use words to express and describe their feelings without punishment for feeling negative.

## 5 to 8 years old – Elementary School

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Common and expected healthy child behaviors for elementary school children 5 to 8 years old:

- More use of slang terms to include “potty humor”
- A beginning understanding of cultural gender roles and acting in a more “gendered” way as they learn expected behaviors and norms, such as girls asking to wear dresses
- Engaging in activities that explore sexuality and bodies with same- and opposite-sex friends, such as showing or touching someone else’s private areas by mutual consent, kissing, etc.
- Continued masturbation, possibly for pleasure, more often in private than in public

To encourage healthy child behavior, your military family can:

- Promote a solid understanding of gender and how children experience gender identity. Children at this age may begin to identify as transgender, gender nonconforming or nonbinary but may not have the words for their experience or to express their confusion. These children will need strong and loving support from their parents. Visit the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) website for more information.
- Explain more of the basics of human reproduction, including the purpose of vaginal intercourse.
- Talk about the changes they can expect when puberty happens including rapid growth, body hair growth and emotional shifts, keeping in mind that puberty can occur before the traditionally referenced age of 12 or 13.
- Discuss the different sexual orientations that exist, including heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual.
- Teach that masturbation is something that occurs in private situations only.
- Continue promoting personal rights and responsibilities related to sexuality, like treating boys and girls equally.
- Continue teaching about respecting personal boundaries, as well as the ability to say “no” to any unwanted activity without guilt or shame and accepting “no” from another with empathy and kindness.





## 9 to 12 years old – Middle School

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Common and expected healthy child behaviors for middle school children 9 to 12 years old:

- Increased need for privacy and personal independence as puberty begins
- New interest in romantic relationships, including interest in wanting a boyfriend or girlfriend
- More curiosity about adult bodies and sexuality, including trying to see others naked and finding sexual content to watch or read
- Possible continued masturbation in private

To encourage healthy development, parents can:

- Offer children continuing information about puberty, including the physical, emotional and social changes that are normal and healthy for people their age.
- Give children age-appropriate information about sexual activities and behaviors, including sexually transmitted diseases.
- Encourage children's critical thinking skills to separate reality from fiction in media portrayals of sexuality.
- Remind children that relationships – including friendships – require work to maintain and grow and teach them the qualities of a healthy relationship, such as respect and trust.
- Repeat the importance that they have a right to refuse any unwanted behavior from others and others have a right to refuse any unwanted behavior.

More parent-friendly resources to help you learn more about your child's behavior – and how you can help them grow into happy, healthy adults – can be found at the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#), the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) and the [National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth](#). Learn more about [Sexual Development and Behavior in Children](#) and [Understanding and Coping with Sexual Behavior Problems in Children](#).

### Addressing unhealthy sexual behaviors in children

If a child's sexual behavior occurs weekly or daily, involves playmates of vastly different ages or developmental stages, hurts anyone or otherwise forces unwanted sexual activities onto others, that child may be demonstrating concerning or problematic sexual behaviors which warrant an assessment by a professional to ensure the safety and well-being of all children.

Most children who show problematic sexual behaviors respond well to informed parent support, increased guidance and supervision and evidence-based treatment programs, with no future incidents of sexually inappropriate behavior. The Department of Defense is committed to helping the entire military community grow strong together. If you need additional assistance, contact Military OneSource directly [by phone](#) or set up a [live chat](#) today. OCONUS/international? [Click here for calling options](#).

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