



# Childhood Masturbation

## **What is masturbation?**

Throughout the different stages of child development, children enjoy exploring the world around them with curiosity, including their own bodies. Even toddlers may engage in genital stimulation, for instance, boys may touch their penises whereas girls may rub their vaginas against cushions or toys. Some parents may feel surprised, worried, or disturbed when noticing such behaviours in their children. Yet, for children, this exploration of touching is as natural as touching their own hands and faces, and is a process of understanding their bodies. Children often touch themselves when they are daydreaming, bored, or sleepy, or before going to bed. The discovery of pleasant feelings from touching their genitals in turn reinforce the subsequent behaviours. Furthermore, significant life events, such as moving to a new house, having a new family member, changing to a new school environment, parental divorce, bereavement, etc., may cause stress for children, leading to negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, or sadness. It is sometimes difficult for children to handle such negative affects; and masturbation may become a coping strategy to regulate their emotions, to alleviate their stress, and to bring them comfort.

## **How can parents manage childhood masturbation?**

Occasional masturbation is a normal behaviour of many toddlers and children. It does not necessarily imply excessive sexual desires or impulses and will not cause physical harm to children. If your child masturbates at home at times, especially if it only





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happens during bedtime, parents can just ignore it. It is not abnormal unless children masturbate frequently or in public after age 6. Parents may then consider the following strategies.

### 1) Avoid criticism

Do not strictly forbidden or label the behaviour as dirty, evil, guilty, or inappropriate. Parents may have different views on childhood masturbation, but prohibition or punishment will not help to solve the problem. Adults' overreaction will only make the children feel shameful and helpless, and cause emotional harm, such as guilt and sexual hang-ups. Children would then hide their thoughts and feelings from their parents and masturbates secretly.

### 2) Render appropriate guidance

Understanding the reasons behind can facilitate effective counselling. If your child's behaviour is related to factors such as family or environmental changes, help your child to cope with the negative emotions arose from these changes. If your child is old enough and is capable of expressing himself/herself, you can discuss with him/her in an open-minded manner. Ideally, fathers can communicate with their sons whereas mothers can communicate with their daughters. Parents can start with saying: *"Dad/Mom notices that you sometimes touch your genital, can you tell me why?"*, or *"Dad/Mom understands that touching ourselves can sometimes be relieving and bring us comfort. But you will then have less time for other interesting activities if you spend too much time on doing so. Is there any other thing that you want to do (with mummy/daddy)?"*.





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Some parents may feel embarrassed when they are talking about this topic, but it is a valuable opportunity to educate your child about the correct views of sex. Meanwhile, this can also foster mutual trust and promote a trustworthy relationship between parents and their children.

### **3) Alter the environmental triggers**

Record the time and places of the child's masturbatory behaviour, observe the antecedents and consequences of the behaviours, and enquire people who are familiar with the child (e.g. teachers). From the information gathered, parents can then speculate the underlying causes and find possible ways to help your child. For example, a child often touches his genital when he wears a certain type of underwear. This may be because the underwear does not fit him and causes discomfort. Parents can thus find some suitable and comfortable underwear, and further observe the child's behaviour. As another illustrative example, a child may often rub his/her genital against a chair or tricycle. Parents can remove the chair or tricycle, and observe the child's behaviours afterwards.

### **4) Divert attention / provide stress relief activities**

Some children masturbate because they feel bored, or simply because the behaviour makes them feel good. Parents can therefore divert their attention by providing them with interesting and fun activities. For example, if your child touches his/her genitals when travelling, you can give him/her a toy to hold or ask them to carry shopping bags for you to keep his/her hands occupied. If your child masturbates when he/she is lying around or watching television on the sofa, you can place some toys, games, or books on the sofa to engage your child. Simultaneously, parents can take initiatives inviting





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them to engage in various activities like colouring, building blocks, or playing board games. Hold your child's hands and look into his/her eyes, *"Dad/mom wants to build blocks/play games with you"*.

If your child masturbates to relieve stress, parents can identify the stressors and help their children to manage the stress. Participating in various activities (e.g. sports or arts) can be beneficial in alleviating negative emotions. You can also accompany your child in these activities, which will not only reduce the masturbatory behaviours, but also let them know that they can always rely on you in times of challenges.

### 5) Establish positive and healthy concepts

Let your child understand his/her body and learn to protect himself/herself. Teach your child that masturbation is a private and personal act:

- Only yourself can touch your own private parts and don't let others see or touch yours. Similarly, don't touch others' private parts.
- Wash your hands before touching yourself. Or else, bacteria may enter the genital through your hands, and you will consequently get infected.
- Masturbation is a private and personal behaviour that can only be done in private places. Children under age 5 may not be able to understand the concept of "privacy". You can bring your child to the restroom or his/her own room, and explain to them, *"Rubbing your private part may make you feel comfortable and it is fine to do so. However, because this is a private and personal behaviour, you can only do it in private places with no one around at home, such as in your bedroom. It cannot be done in public or in front of others, for instance, in someone's home or in the living room."*





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### 6) Sex education

As children grow up, parents will inevitably face more challenges in providing sex education for their children. If you can teach your child the relevant knowledge with an open-minded and positive attitude, it will help to reduce confusion and misunderstanding in the future. Encourage your child to ask and search for answers with them. Through books or daily conversation, you can provide him/ her with age-appropriate sex education and convey appropriate values. Safe and open discussion helps to establish your child's gender identity and roles. It fosters good parent-child communication and relationship, and is indeed, a vital step to reduce future behavioural problems and misunderstandings about sex.

### ***When to seek for professional support?***

Parents can observe the whereabouts masturbation takes place and its frequency, and to give their children appropriate guidance. Should your child masturbates frequently, and/or if it is accompanied by other emotional or behavioural problems (for example, masturbating in public and affecting other people, touching other people's sex parts, or causing self-harm, etc.), or should he/she show some unusual physical signs or behavioural changes, these may imply age-inappropriate or unusual experiences, including sexual assault, physical abuse, etc. You should then seek professional support accordingly.





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### Parents can consider the following resources and counselling services:

- The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong (Tel: 2572 2222)  
Sex education resources – <https://www.famplan.org.hk/sexedu/zh>
- Department of Health Student Health Service (Dr. Sex Hotline: 2337 2121)  
Sex education resources –  
[https://www.studenthealth.gov.hk/tc\\_chi/health/health\\_se/health\\_se.html](https://www.studenthealth.gov.hk/tc_chi/health/health_se/health_se.html)
- Education Bureau – Sex education resources- <https://www.edb.gov.hk/tc/curriculum-development/4-key-tasks/moral-civic/sea/sea.html>
- Social Welfare Department (Hotline: 2343 2255)
- Hong Kong Family Welfare Society (Hotline: 2342 3110)
- Against Child Abuse (Hong Kong) (Seek help and Parenting support hotline: 2755 1122)
- End Child Sexual Abuse Foundation ('Hugline' and counselling: 2889 9933)

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