

## Parent Support Material: Do You Know Why Kids Masturbate?

### Therapist Gives 5 reasons and Top Tips for a Healthy Response Plan

adapted from an article by Taylor Chambers, licensed marriage and family therapist, Oct 19, 2021

<https://www.defendyoungminds.com>



Whether your child is young or a teen, it's important to pause and consider your response when you find out your child has discovered masturbation. This article offers some guidance with a few straight-forward ideas:

- **re-think first reactions** to quickly eliminate masturbation
- pay attention to **what may be driving the masturbation**, and
- **develop a response plan** that is wise and effective.

### Be careful with masturbation elimination efforts

These *can be ineffective and even backfire*, inadvertently generating *more* sexual compulsion and causing shame. We can't make our kid's sexuality just go away and they wouldn't properly mature if we could. Finding the balance between control and passivity can be tricky. A wise response demands that we:

- **pause** our reactions,
- **tolerate** a possibly undesired reality for a moment,
- **consider** our largest values, and
- **select** a solid (though sometimes challenging) course of action.

**Start finding wise solutions by considering what may be driving the behaviour. Ask yourself: "Why would it make sense for my child to masturbate?"** Exploring underlying **motivations** can help guide your response.

### Five common drivers of masturbation:

1. Discovery
2. Development
3. Coping
4. Compulsion
5. Trauma-Processing

Some of these (discovery, development, and sometimes coping) are considered normal and non-problematic *from a psychological or developmental perspective*. Some parents have no problem "allowing" for healthy masturbation. Others may believe there's no such thing. Either way, **these points of view will be useful** in formulating a wise response that will avoid fuelling the very problem you may be hoping will disappear.

#### 1. Discovery –

Children are built to explore the world around them. Teens and adults too. Many, but not all, young children will discover that rubbing their private parts is pleasurable. Sometimes self-stimulation is really as simple as a "body trick" that feels great. Body-discovery is natural and has not been shown to lead to future problems unless other issues become entangled with it (*as described below*).

#### 2. Development –

In time, self-stimulation may begin to be connected to larger ideas like sex, spirituality, relationships, and humanity. Children will gain more awareness of what is and is not appropriate, harmful, and "normal." From a sexual development perspective, masturbation can be a non-problematic means of expressing one's evolving sexual nature. Development involves learning from healthy guilt when our behaviours cause harm or integrating our complex nature to understand when our behaviours are appropriate. Again, this type of engagement with sexuality has not been linked to future problems such as sexual risk-taking, exploitation, or addiction.

Many value systems discourage all self-stimulation - even this developmental type of masturbation. If that's the case, thoughtfully use the recommended responses found below to **help your child avoid forming a problematic pattern** with masturbation and trust that their development will lead to self-mastery and integrity.

### 3. Coping –

For many children, the discovery of erogenous pleasure eventually overlaps with emotional experiences. Sexual stimulation is powerful enough to mood-alter. It may make boredom, anger, sorrow, powerlessness, or insecurities go away for at least a brief period of time. Or it may augment a happy or relaxing day. The most common way masturbation can regulate emotions is to soothe stress or take the edge off anxiety.

Self-soothing may or may not lead to future challenges. The trouble may come if your adolescent begins to over-rely on sexual behaviours for coping.

### 4. Compulsion –

This is any behaviour that happens repeatedly despite efforts to avoid or moderate it. Compulsion occurs when desire-circuitry in the brain becomes too reinforced, too rigid, and too disconnected from other brain modules such as the prefrontal cortex (not when desire is “too much”). This is most likely to occur when the behaviour is laden with intense emotion such as fear, shame, or desperation.

If masturbation is compulsive, it may begin to interfere with other valued activities or escalate into more frequent, intense, or risky behaviour.

### 5. Trauma-Processing –

When sexual abuse has occurred a child, teen, or adult may orbit around behaviours or themes related to the wounding experiences. Ironically, it's natural for any of us to place ourselves into situations or re-enact scenarios as an unconscious effort to process through our traumas. Non-sexual trauma could also push a child to rely more heavily on whatever coping methods they have developed, including masturbation.

*Compulsion does not necessarily mean trauma has occurred, and trauma does not necessarily mean that behaviour will be compulsive. But the two can mix together at times.*

## Develop a wise and effective response plan to childhood masturbation

### Responding well to discovery and development

When you sense that your child's behaviour is simply exploratory, normative and uncomplicated, then you can trust they are on the road to sexual maturity.

With young children, self-pleasuring can occur at inappropriate times. Rather than stamping the behaviour out harshly, simply **redirect**. Try “hey, let's be sure to only touch our private parts in private,” or, “please do that in your room or the bathroom where others can't see.” If the touching is driven by discovery and natural development, most children will quickly break the public habit after just a few reminders.

Mentally review your child's level of sexual education. What have you taught them? Do they understand things like basic anatomy, privacy, and safety? As they grow older do they know what sex is, how reproduction occurs, and how sexuality ties into identity and relationships? Do they understand your definition of sexual integrity, ie: have you shared your values, attitudes and beliefs?

Occasionally drop in nuggets of information and periodically ask questions to start an ongoing dialogue. While some kids and teens are embarrassed to have healthy conversations, you'll find that many are open and interested. Keep in mind that even “normal” sexual development can include mistakes, a bit of turmoil, and weirdness.

Kids can learn to not indulge sexual urges that are harmful or counter to their values. And they can honour their sexual nature by channelling that energy toward vitality, healthy relationships, confidence, and joy - with or without masturbation.

## Responding well to coping

Coping is normal and can be either healthy or unhealthy. You can probably reflect and find both helpful and unhelpful coping in your own life. If this is a driver then it's a good opportunity to **discuss effective coping and resolution strategies** with your child. Discuss what coping methods your child sees in their own lives (they probably won't mention masturbation). Share some of your own. **Rather than focusing on stopping "bad" coping, try to focus on developing more options for coping.** More options (eg: video games, reading, music, basketball, deep breathing, positive self-talk, walking the dog) means self-stimulation is a much smaller slice of the pie - it'll occur much less frequently and with less intensity.

Coping helps us get through difficult times but **it generally won't solve the original stressor or problem.** Sometimes the right move is to face the music, step into the difficulty and create change. This could involve setting boundaries with others and tackling tasks.

With some balance, occasional masturbation will not typically lead to problems such as promiscuity or harmful sexual choices. If your value system is aimed toward avoiding as much masturbation as possible, teaching your child or teen how to juggle healthy coping with effective resolution skills can help.

## Responding well to compulsion or trauma

If a child or teen is displaying intensity or "stuckness" or if they are enacting harmful and serious behaviours, then their actions may be stemming from compulsion or trauma. In the long-term, spend more time addressing the root (*the source of the compulsion or the trauma*) than on eliminating the behaviour. **If you're able to support your child in finding resolution and healing then the need to reach for masturbation will be diminished.**

For example, a compulsion may ease up and slow down as your child develops more self-worth (assuming that worthlessness drove the compulsion in the first place). Or the behaviours may diminish as you educate about sexuality and convey acceptance, even of missteps (assuming the compulsion arose from shame about their sexual urges).

If trauma is addressed - through establishing safety, sharing their narrative, rebalancing power differentials, accountability, forgiveness, etc. - then the need to process their wound with sexual re-enactment or rebellion will fade away.

After the stressors have been resolved there may still be a season of intentional habit-breaking, hopefully led by the child or teen's intrinsic motivation. **This will allow their sexuality to break free of lingering ties to old patterns and resume healthy development.**

As is clear from these examples, this can sometimes be a long and difficult journey. Early on, you may need some boundaries, limits or rules to establish a baseline of safety or distance from acting out. Hopefully these can be **collaborated with your child** rather than imposed on them.

Unless the compulsion or trauma is mild, **look at getting support.** Find a therapist, program, or other resources to move through this process - just be sure the treatment goals do not accidentally reinforce any shame or repression that originally generated the masturbation.

## In conclusion

When you discover your child's masturbation, consider *why* it makes perfect sense for them to be doing that. That should set you up to **develop a response plan that is individualized** and ultimately effective at helping them achieve sexual maturity.

Take these ideas and write down what is driving your child's masturbation. Then write out the steps you believe will be most helpful in their development.