



MID-JERSEY PEDIATRICS

www.midjerseypeds.com

**33 Brunswick Woods Drive
East Brunswick, NJ 08816
(732) 257-4330**

**25 Kilmer Drive
Building #3, Suite 107
Morganville, NJ 07751
(732) 972-6888**

MASTURBATION IN PRESCHOOLERS

DEFINITION:

Masturbation is self-stimulation of the genitals for pleasure and self-comfort. Children may rub themselves with a hand or another object. During masturbation, a child usually appears dazed, flushed, or pre-occupied. Children may masturbate as often as several times a day or just occasionally. Masturbation occurs more commonly when a child is sleepy, bored, watching TV, or under stress.

CAUSE:

Occasional masturbation is a normal behavior of many toddlers and preschoolers. Up to 1/3 of children in this age group discover masturbation while exploring their bodies. Often they continue to masturbate simply because it feels good. Some children masturbate often because they are unhappy about something. Others are reacting to pressure. Masturbation has no medical causes. Irritation in the genital area causes pain and itching. It does not cause masturbation.

EXPECTED COURSE:

Once your child discovers masturbation, he will seldom stop doing it completely. By age 5 or 6 most children can learn some discretion and will masturbate only in private. Masturbation becomes almost universal at puberty in response to the normal surges in hormones and sexual drive.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS:

Masturbation does not cause physical injury or harm to the body. It is not abnormal or excessive unless it is deliberately done in public after age 5 or 6. It does not mean your child will be over-sexed, promiscuous, or sexually deviant. Only if adults over react to a child's masturbation and make it seem dirty or wicked, will it cause emotional harm, such as guilt and sexual hang-ups.

COMING TO TERMS WITH MASTURBATION IN PRESCHOOLERS:

- Set realistic goals. It is impossible to eliminate masturbation. Accept the fact that your child has discovered it and enjoys it. All you can control is where your child does it. A reasonable goal is to permit it only in the bedroom or the bathroom.
- Ignore masturbation at nap time and bedtime. Leave your child alone at these times and do not keep checking on him or her. Do not forbid your child from lying on the abdomen and do not ask if his or her hands are between their legs.
- Distract or discipline your child for masturbation at other times. First try to distract your child with a toy or an activity. If that does not work, explain to your child, "I know that rubbing your body feels good, but you are not allowed to do that around other people. This is private. It is OK to do it in your room or in the bathroom, but not in the rest of the house."
- Discuss this approach with your child's daycare center or preschool staff. Ask the child's caregiver or teacher to respond to your child's masturbation by first trying to distract the child. If this does not work they can catch the child's attention with comments such as "We need you to join us now". Masturbation should be tolerated at school only at nap time.
- Increase physical contact with your child. Some children will masturbate less if they have extra hugging and cuddling throughout the day. Try to be sure that your child receives at least one hour every day of special time together and physical affection from you.
- Avoid these common mistakes. The most common mistake parents make is to try to eliminate masturbation completely. This leads to a power struggle that parents inevitably lose. Children should not be physically punished for masturbation, nor yelled at or lectured about it. Do not label masturbation as bad or dirty, evil or sinful. All of these approaches lead only to resistance and possibly later to sexual inhibitions.