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**NTDC Right Time Training  
SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT & IDENTITY  
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**Question 1: What does healthy sexual development look like throughout a child's developmental journey?**

Sexual development begins at birth. Very young children and those of preschool age are curious about other people's bodies and bodily functions. They also are curious about their own bodies and often want to be naked. They discover that touching certain body parts feels nice. As a child starts to interact more with other children, the child notices differences between boys and girls. The child may begin "playing doctor" or copying adult behaviors such as kissing and holding hands. The child may ask questions about where babies come from and why boys and girls are physically different.

In grade school, children become more aware of social rules. They tend to want more privacy, particularly around adults. Self-touch and sexual play continue but often are hidden from adults. Curiosity about adult sexual behavior increases as puberty approaches. This can lead to children seeking out sexual content in television programs, movies and printed materials. Children approaching puberty are likely to start displaying romantic and sexual interest in their peers.

Behaviors that are outside of typical development or harmless curiosity may require additional assessment. These include:

- any act that is clearly beyond the child's developmental stage (for example, a three-year-old attempting to kiss an adult's genitals);
- behaviors that involve threats, force or aggression;
- children of widely different ages or abilities engaged in certain activities together (such as a 12-year-old "playing doctor" with a four-year-old);
- behaviors that provoke strong emotional reactions in the child, such as anger or anxiety; and
- behaviors that interfere with typical childhood interests and activities.

If you as a parent fostering or adopting observe behaviors from this list involving a child in your care, talk with your caseworker about them.

## **Question 2: How can a parent who is fostering or adopting promote healthy sexual development?**

Many factors impact sexual development. Some parts of a person's sexual development are "baked in" or inherent in the person from birth. We observe these elements unfold as a child grows and develops physically, such as when the child is beginning puberty. Other areas of sexual development are influenced by family and social interactions. This is important to consider as we think about promoting healthy sexual development. Healthy sexual development starts when children are very young as they learn from and are impacted by the relationships and interactions of the persons around them. As children mature, this impact broadens to include interactions with peers, programs they watch or see on social media or other media outlets, adults who play key roles in their lives and the children's own personal experiences. Parents who are fostering or adopting also play a key role in ensuring the healthy sexual development of children in their home. Depending on the age when a child moves into the home and the child's previous experiences, the parent who is fostering or adopting may need to play a more active role in promoting the child's healthy sexual development.

Here are some tips about promoting healthy sexual development for parents who are fostering or adopting:

- Help children to learn personal boundaries. For younger children this involves teaching about when it is okay to give and to receive hugs, plus explaining personal space and healthy touching versus unhealthy touching. For older children this can include providing information about healthy relationships; learning when and how to say, "No"; feeling comfortable to use their voices, and feeling positive about self-identity.
- Help children to learn socially appropriate physical care and hygiene skills. This can include the importance of brushing teeth and taking showers regularly, caring for hair and skin, using deodorant, etc.
- Model healthy relationships in your home.
- Use positive body language that helps children to feel comfortable and confident with their physical appearance.
- Allow children to talk and to ask questions related to their own sexuality. Be prepared to listen without passing judgment. Connect children with resources, groups and information to answer questions or to provide information that the children are seeking.
- Keep information about children's sexuality confidential. Confidentiality is important overall but can be even more sensitive when related to sexuality. If you think that you need to share something about a child in your care with the caseworker or another professional, let the child know ahead of time and the reason why sharing this information is important or required.
- Understand basic child development, including healthy sexual development. (A handout about sexual development is in the resources section of this theme). Plan ahead so that you will be prepared to work with children as they mature and progress with their own

sexuality. When needed, talk about safe sexual practices with children; or connect them with medical professionals who can do this. Know what is considered developmentally appropriate and typical at different ages of childhood so that you can identify when an issue that arises might require professional assistance.

- Help children to know risks and barriers that they might encounter through social media, school and other adults. Children who have been sexually abused can be at greater risk than other children of becoming involved in unhealthy relationships, sex trafficking, sexual activity at an earlier age, etc. It is important for you to equip children with information that is developmentally appropriate so that they will be prepared to handle challenges that might come their way.

**Question 3: How can parents who are fostering or adopting create a supportive, accepting environment that helps children to feel comfortable and less stressed about physical changes as they mature?**

As children approach and enter puberty, you need to be sensitive to their need for privacy. Protection of privacy applies not only to the children's bodies but also to matters such as remembering to knock before entering their rooms. Preteens start to give more attention to how they look. During this time, watch for signs that they might have a negative image of their bodies. Most preteens will become embarrassed easily if they are teased about the changing shape of their bodies. Young males can become embarrassed easily by someone joking about their deepening voices. Avoid even good-natured teasing or kidding about these changes because it can be embarrassing and hurtful to children.

Some teens become especially worried about the changes in their bodies. They feel embarrassed and self-conscious as their bodies change. Some girls may prefer to wear loose-fitting clothing to hide their changing bodies, while other girls might dress in ways that are not well-matched to their age. In these situations, start by affirming their pride in their appearance and the fact that their appearance makes them feel good. You can talk with children about how clothing can project certain images. (For example, dressing in a more professional way for a job interview projects an image of a mature, responsible person.) Reassure teens that you don't want to control what they wear. Explain that you want them to see the benefits of wearing outfits that are comfortable and that help them to feel good about who they are.

Many girls worry about getting their first menstrual period. You can help by ensuring that preteen girls know what their period means and are prepared for it when it comes. Health-care providers such as doctors, nurses and nurse practitioners also are good resources to whom you can turn if you need help having these conversations. Make sure that your home has supplies that a preteen girl would need and that they are easily accessible to her. Before she has her first period, make sure that someone has explained to her how to use sanitary products. Reassure her that while she is having her periods, she can participate as normal in activities such as physical education classes and active sports, including swimming, hiking and soccer.

For children who may identify as transgender, puberty becomes particularly challenging as their bodies begin to develop sexually. Children can struggle when there is a difference between their gender identity and their sex assigned at birth. Their distress can include anxiety, depression, self-harm and thoughts of suicide. Look for these signs, and talk with these children to find ways to support them. Family and community members including teachers, coaches and counselors who ally with the child can go a long way toward providing protection against the impact of negative messages that these children may receive. Supporting these children during this period will help them to form a positive body image and self-esteem. (See Question 8 - 11 for more about sexuality identity and gender expression).

**Question 4: What can parents who are fostering or adopting do to support a child in developing a strong, positive self-image during adolescence?**

You can support the child by showing that you accept who the child is without reservation. You need to point out the child's strengths and to acknowledge and to recognize the child's efforts, even when the outcome might not be ideal or the actions weren't performed in the way you would have done them. Be careful not to be overly critical. The experience of trauma can cause a child to have a heightened response to negative emotions. This means that you need to pay extra attention to your tone of voice and to the words that you choose. Showing interest by being involved in the teen's life and making an effort to spend time with the teen also can help. Remember that the biggest factor involved in predicting resilience and positive outcomes for a child is a family that is accepting and supportive.<sup>1</sup>

LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer or Questioning) children often face additional challenges. Bullying and stigma are problems that many LGBTQ individuals face, making it harder for these children to develop a positive self-image. This can be especially true if they do not have caring persons who are willing to be their allies and to provide support for them. Allying and supportive persons can buffer some of the negative messages that these children might receive.

**Question 5: How can experiences of trauma, separation or loss influence a child's sexual development?**

While sexual behavior can be normal for teens, the goal is to help them to stay safe if they do have sexual relationships. Some teens who were neglected during their early development and who lacked physical touch or comfort may crave physical contact as a way to soothe themselves and to feel accepted. As a result, these teens often lack boundaries and become sexually active to feel closeness or to feel loved.

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan, Caitlin. (2010). Engaging families to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth: The Family Acceptance Project. *Prevention and Researcher*. 17(4): 11-13.

Many teens who have felt abandoned look for love and stability through romantic partnerships. This can cause some teens to place too much importance on dating relationships and to give priority to these relationships above all other areas of life.

Other common ways that teens express their trauma through relationships include:

- **Life-boating:** Life-boating includes beginning a relationship for the sake of having a place to stay or a family to visit over the holidays. It also can include dating many persons at the same time but never focusing on one person.
- **Relationship testing:** Some teens in foster care have trouble trusting others and feel insecure about how others might feel or think about them. These teens often express their insecurities by creating chaos in their dating relationships. This behavior allows the teen to feel as though they are in more control over feeling rejected when the relationship ends.
- **Chameleon effect:** A chameleon lizard changes color to blend in with its surroundings. The chameleon effect in dating refers to a teen whose likes and personality change to fit whatever a romantic partner wants. This can prevent the teen from developing an independent and consistent sense of self.

Part of your job as a parent who is fostering or adopting is to help children in your care to change any negative beliefs they might have about themselves as well as to make them feel loved and nurtured in healthy, positive, nonsexual ways. Do what you say you will do. Be consistent and trustworthy. Respect the children's privacy. Spend time doing fun activities together. Help the young persons in your care to develop healthy connections by inviting friends to come for visits. You can help a teen to build a positive sense of self and to learn how to have healthy relationships by showing appropriate touch and affection yourself. Relate to the teen your own experiences about times earlier in your life when you didn't make good decisions about a relationship. Don't be afraid to talk about birth control and safe sex practices to prevent sexually transmitted infections. This is true for all genders.

#### **Question 6: What should parents who are fostering or adopting consider regarding a teen's romantic life?**

Parents who are fostering need to remember that some children have seen dating or romantic relationships that included violence, abuse or both. This can make it hard for them to know when they aren't being treated well or even when they are treating others badly. Make sure that you are modeling good relationship skills for the child in your care. Provide examples of healthy ways to settle arguments. You can show a teen how to build a positive sense of self and how to have healthy relationships by displaying appropriate touch and affection, being trustworthy, doing what you say you will do and spending time doing fun activities with the teen. Talk openly about relationships with the teen, including sharing your own experiences about times when you didn't make good decisions about a relationship.

It can be scary for you to think about keeping a teen safe when it comes to dating. Instead of cutting the teen out from relationships, add structure to the dating process, especially at the beginning. For example, ensure that the dates take place in a supervised setting. One way to do this is to welcome the teen's friends into your home. You also can keep a teen and the teen's dating partner involved in positive activities with your family, such as a family game night or movie night. Limit dates to times when you will be at home, and set a rule that doors are to stay open while the teen's friends are visiting. When you begin to allow the teen more time alone with friends, make sure that you know their plans: where they are going, who will be with them and what they will be doing. If the teen will be with friends for an extended period, it is a good idea for you to get an agreement about times when the teen will check in with you. It is also a good idea to talk with the teen about a curfew time.

If you are fostering or adopting teens, talk with them about what they enjoy about their relationships, how they are being treated by the persons they are dating and the way they are treating their dates. Ask what they think makes a good relationship in general; then turn the conversation back to what they think are the positives and negatives of their own relationships. Provide lots of ways for teens to explore and to express their own feelings, thoughts and interests.

#### **Question 7: How can parents who are fostering or adopting support the sexuality and identity development of a child in their care?**

When you understand which behaviors are typical at different stages, you will be able to support the child's sexuality and identity development better. As the child grows older, you will need to help the child to make sense of the messages that the child is receiving about sexuality from the media and from peers. Teens receive information about sexuality from all kinds of sources. You may be parenting a child who is unsure or uncomfortable about the child's own sexual orientation or gender identity. The child may not share these worries with you for fear of being rejected.

Staying informed and keeping communication open are important for you to ensure that a child in your care has accurate information. Use natural opportunities to talk about sex and relationships. These might include situations that you see on a television program or the child telling you about an incident that has happened at school or with friends.

If the child expresses questions or worries about sexuality and identity development, don't dismiss these questions or act as if you didn't hear them. Have honest, open conversations with the child. If you don't feel comfortable talking about sexuality, then find a community resource or mentor who can talk with the child about those questions and worries and who can provide support to the child.

#### **Question 8: What does "SOGIE" mean?**

**SOGIE** stands for **s**exual **o**rientation, **g**ender **i**ntity and **e**xpression. SOGIE is a term that includes all types of sexual orientation and gender identities and expressions. The term **diverse SOGIE** describes children who are expressing a nontraditional sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Sexual orientation** refers to a person's emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other persons. Examples of sexual orientations include straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual and asexual. Gender refers to how we view ourselves, and orientation refers to how we view persons to whom we are attracted. Young children typically don't have sexual attractions until they are approaching puberty; so, there is no way to be certain of their orientation, regardless of their feminine or masculine expression during early childhood. However, young children can feel affection for someone of the same gender. For example, many LGBTQ adults talk about having an emotional crush on somebody of the same gender.

**Gender identity** refers to a person's identification as a man, woman or other gender. Examples of gender identities include male, female, genderqueer, genderfluid and bigender.

**Gender expression** refers to the way that a person decides to show one's own gender identity to others. Examples of words that describe someone's gender expression include masculine, feminine, androgynous, butch and femme. It is important to note that supporting a child's gender expression and presentation is not going to make the child gay.

**Question 9: How can parents who are fostering or adopting prepare, support and protect a child in their care who is exploring the child's SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression)?**

Creating a welcoming home for LGBTQ children is not much different from creating a safe and supportive home for any child. To start, do not assume anything about the child's gender identity or sexual orientation. Use gender-neutral language when asking about relationships. For example, instead of asking, "Do you have a girlfriend?" ask, "Is there anyone special in your life?" Provide the child with access to a variety of books, movies and materials, including those that represent same-sex relationships positively. Allow the child to join activities that interest the child, regardless of whether those activities usually follow male or female stereotypes (such as dancing is only for girls or rough sports are only for boys). Gender stereotypes are so engrained in our society that you will have to stay alert in order not to fall into this way of thinking. Support the child's self-expression in the choice of clothing, jewelry, hairstyle, friends and room decoration. Insist that other family members include and respect all children in your home. Do not allow slurs or jokes about gender or sexuality. Never expect the child to attend activities (including religious activities) that are openly hostile or that do not support LGBTQ persons. Display "hate-free zone" signs or other symbols (such as a pink triangle or a rainbow flag) indicating an environment friendly to LGBTQ persons. Be aware that LGBTQ children are at a higher risk than other children for mental health challenges and suicide, especially when they

are not given support and a sense of safety in important relationships in their home environments.

It is not uncommon for LGBTQ children to receive comments and questions from members of the general public. At times these can come off as offensive and even scary. Make your home a safe place where children feel heard and accepted. Ask the child you are fostering or adopting about any challenges the child is facing related to the child's sexuality or gender expression. Find local resources that support children exploring their SOGIE.

**Question 10: How can parents who foster or adopt prepare a child for bias and discrimination related to the child's sexual orientation and gender identity and expression?**

Do not be afraid to talk with the child about discrimination and personal safety. LGBTQ (an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning) persons are more likely than others to be targeted for discrimination and hate crimes. LGBTQ children are twice as likely as their peers to say that they have been physically assaulted, kicked or shoved. They might live in a community that is not accepting of LGBTQ people.

You not only need to accept the child whom you are fostering or adopting for who that child is but also need to affirm that children should not hide who they are. Teach the child self-protection from discrimination and how to stay safe. Share ways of responding to discrimination. These responses might include filing a complaint or finding a new doctor if a teen's doctor does not respect the teen's identity, talking with school staff if the teen is being bullied at school, or joining a gay-straight alliance or similar club to connect with others who have had similar experiences or are facing similar challenges. Help the child develop a plan about what to do if ever in a situation where the child doesn't feel safe. Make sure that the teen has quick and easy access to emergency phone numbers to call, such as your cell phone number and the caseworker's cell phone number. Encourage the child to call 911 if the child ever feels in immediate danger. Identify adults to whom the teen can turn for help in places where the teen spends a lot of time, such as at school, at work or in an afterschool program.

**Question 11: What does two-spirit (S2) mean, and how can parents who foster or adopt support a child who may identify in this way?**

*Two-spirit* is a modern term generally applied to Indigenous persons who have both male (masculine) and female (feminine) characteristics. This means that they may participate in activities stereotypical of both males and females or might have both male and female sexual organs and chromosome patterns. Instead of using the English word "two-spirit," some tribes refer to these persons in their own Indigenous language with words that have more specific and culturally appropriate meanings. However, some tribes may not use such phrases or may have used them formerly but since then have discontinued using them in the tribal language. There are historical stories of two-spirit persons who were accepted and respected in tribal



communities before colonization. Accounts from various tribal nations indicate that some two-spirit persons were perceived as having special powers and spiritual abilities because of their unique differences from other members of these tribes.

Today, being seen as different in this way promotes a lack of acceptance. Children who may have two-spirit leanings or may identify themselves as two-spirit can become targets of prejudice and discrimination. Discriminatory behaviors can occur both outside and within American Indian Alaskan Native communities. Becoming the target of such discrimination can put the two-spirit child at risk for:

- issues with self-identity and self-esteem;
- increased stress associated with long-term, poor mental and physical health, and
- sexual and physical violence.

In the same way that other children perceived as “different” need acceptance from the parents fostering or adopting them, so do two-spirit children. This does not mean that the parents need to come armed with a complete understanding of the often-complicated concepts of being two-spirit. However, it does mean that having an open heart to understand and to accept two-spirit children for who they are and to meet them where they’re at can provide these children with a sense of safety in a nurturing home. Children who identify as two-spirit likely will benefit from the suggestions offered in other questions and answers for this theme, especially regarding the need for parents to support a child’s sexuality and to prepare the child to deal with bias and discrimination related to the child’s sexual identity and gender identity and expression.