Sex Differences in the Naming of Children's Genitalia

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Children's knowledge of human genital anatomy was examined retrospectively. Of the 223 adults who responded to a questionnaire on this subject, 39.8% of males and 29.0% of females learned correct anatomical names for male genitalia as children. In contrast, only 6.1% of females and 17.7% of males learned correct names for female genitalia. Most respondents learned either euphemisms or no names for female genitalia as children. Whereas male respondents acquired a complete vocabulary for male genitalia by a mean age of 11.5 years, female respondents did not complete their anatomical vocabulary for female genitalia until a mean age of 15.6 years. The importance of recognizing that children have erotic experiences and that they need a vocabulary for describing their feelings is discussed.

"What makes girls different from you?" a mother asked her three-year-old son.
He thought for a moment and then replied, "Girls sit down when they go to the bathroom and I use my penis."

The ability to name and identify female and male genital organs is a necessary prerequisite for understanding human sexual functioning. Yet, surprisingly little is known about how this lexicon develops. A review of the literature revealed only two papers pertinent to the topic of genital naming in children. The Kreitlers (1966) found, in a study of children's concepts of sexuality, that boys were

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3 Personal communication from a respondent who is now a parent.
generally more proficient than girls at naming and identifying their own genital organs. Lerner (1976) reported from her clinical observations that an incomplete and anatomically incorrect picture of female genital anatomy was characteristic of most preadolescent children. Even though the data on children’s education about genital anatomy and function are limited, available studies suggest that boys are more knowledgeable than girls about their own genital organs.

The current study was undertaken in order to provide more information about genital vocabulary development in children. Four specific questions were generated to guide this investigation:

1. Is there a sex difference in the ages at which children learn correct anatomical names for their own genitalia?
2. Is there a sex difference in the ages at which children learn names for the genitalia of the opposite sex?
3. What kinds of names are children taught for genitalia other than correct anatomical names?
4. At what ages do children learn correct anatomical names for genitalia?

METHOD

A questionnaire of seven items was devised from a review of the literature concerning sex education in children. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. In part I, subjects were asked to provide information about the earliest names they were taught as children for the genitalia of both sexes. In the second part, subjects were asked to record the ages at which they learned the correct anatomical designation for specific names — vulva, clitoris, vagina, penis, testis, and anus. Labeled diagrams were provided for reference.

Questionnaires were distributed to 500 adult subjects attending lectures at two major universities and two hospitals in the Boston area. Lecture topics were unrelated to sex education. The lectures were attended by college students, physicians, and mental health professionals. Subjects were told that the questionnaire was designed to obtain information about their early sex education and that it should be returned by mail. To increase the reliability of their childhood recollections, subjects were encouraged to contact their parents before filling out the questionnaire. Subjects were asked to specify age, sex, and religious affiliation, but otherwise to remain anonymous. Two-hundred and twenty-three questionnaires (44.6%) were returned over a 3-month period.

RESULTS

One-hundred and fifteen females and 108 males returned the questionnaire. Female respondents ranged in age from 18—64 years (mean = 27.0 ± 8.3