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indecent exposure

When kids can't keep their privates under wraps, it can be both hilarious and horrifying.

AT FIRST, IT WAS LIKE ANY OTHER PLAYDATE—TWO families gathered together, kids playing, adults chatting. But things took an unexpected turn when Mandie Orvitz noticed her four-year-old son, Ben, with his pants around his ankles, waving his penis around with reckless abandon. “He was playing with it and laughing,” recalls the Toronto mom of two.

Ben's X-rated misadventures don't end there. While in the lobby at skating lessons, he dropped his pants and exhorted others to “look at my bum!” while shaking his naked bottom. There was also a cringe-inducing incident at a popular froyo place. “He lifted up his shirt, took two paper bowls, pretended they were boobs and walked around, saying, ‘look at my boobies,’” Orvitz remembers. “The entire place was laughing.” Ben is often motivated by trying to get a reaction out of his older brother. “He'll do anything to get his attention,” Orvitz says.

One moment, a penis or vagina is just another unremarkable body part. The next thing you know, privates are an endless source of fascination, and your child has discovered a new-found penchant for exhibitionism. But experts say there's no need to get your knickers in a knot. “It can make parents anxious, but it's a normal stage of development,” says Susan Hunt, a registered psychologist in Maple Ridge, BC. She explains that preschoolers are just learning the differences between genders and discovering their own bodies, which they may be eager to “share with others.” They're also learning what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in our society, says Sherri MacWilliams, a family educator in Charlottetown. “This is a way they figure out the parameters.”

Melissa Simons* of Stouffville, Ont., can relate. For a long time, her son Zach wanted to have his penis and testicles out in the open. He loved sauntering about in the buff so much, he coined a term for it: “breezies.” He'd go full-frontal at the park or the mall until his mom noticed. Her approach was to have earnest conversations with Zach and to use books to illustrate what's appropriate. “There would be a character he liked, and I'd say, ‘Isn't



that interesting—he's a boy just like you, but he never does breezies. Maybe he thinks it's more comfortable for others and himself to be covered up.”

While it may be embarrassing to see your child flaunt the family jewels in public, it's important not to blow it out of proportion. At this age, children are egocentric, and being naked sometimes just feels good. MacWilliams recommends stopping the behaviour in the moment by letting your child know that what he's doing is not OK, then describing the expected behaviour. “Treat it seriously and act quickly, but don't punish or publicly shame your child,” she says. Definitely don't laugh—either with him or at him. After the incident has passed, she recommends discussing scenarios where it's OK or not OK to be naked. Explain why it's fine not to wear clothes in the tub or at a doctor's exam, then discuss situations where it's important to wear clothes, to illustrate the differences in what's acceptable. If it's a repeat behaviour, you can state an immediate consequence (such as having to leave the park).

Although most kids outgrow this phase, Hunt says it's important to educate them about body awareness and body parts, and what's considered a private activity.

That's exactly what Orvitz has been doing with Ben, explaining that “private parts are private, and that's the reason we wear pants.” She says the conversations seem to resonate in the moment, prompting Ben to pull up his pants. “But as soon as his brother is around, he's at it again,” she says with a sigh. —STACEY STEIN

* NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

MORE THAN A PHASE?

According to registered psychologist Susan Hunt, concern arises about kids who expose themselves if they become sexually intrusive with other children or if the behaviour is persistent. Kids should typically respond to being redirected, but if unhealthy behaviour continues, it could be a red flag, and you may want to consult a professional.