



# potty talk and body glee

Many little boys I have known, and many girls too, go through a long phase during which they love to use body words and potty words to shock people, and to laugh and laugh. This is normal. It happens all over the world. So if your child is using potty words, fasten your seat belt for a good long journey! The better your humor as you handle it, the easier the trip.



## theories on why this happens

I have several theories about why this happens, but I am not sure that understanding the cause is all that important. One of my major theories is that as children's awareness of themselves grows, they become quite aware of the body parts they and others have, and those body parts are highly interesting. But grownups aren't talking about them, and we don't like to. So they need to create a "party atmosphere" to bring up the subject, and to keep it on the table. If we were more enthusiastic, maybe they wouldn't have to provide so much of the enthusiasm. But it's part of integrating yourself as a human being to pay attention to who you are, what your equipment is, and how it all works.



My second theory is that we adults all carry major embarrassment about our bodies. Over the years, that embarrassment has grown so thick that we don't even know we're embarrassed. We only notice it when we leave our pants unzipped or we realize we have spinach in our teeth. But our children, with their extra sensitive antennae for body language and tone, see that we're pretty corseted. Perhaps they defend themselves against the embarrassment they see all around them by making jokes and doing lots of laughter about bodies and such. They may be trying to keep from becoming as stiff as we are, and laughter does the trick. Or, it could be a developmental stage that has to do with how the mind is developing at four, five, six, and seven years of age.

In any case, your child has arrived at this stage, but you may not have arrived at a way to have some fun with this. It will help you to talk with another parent, a good listener, about all your thoughts, worries, objections, and your impulse to make this kind of talk and play stop. Any memories of what your family was like as you were growing up when this kind of talk and play occurred would be good to recall as well, since our tightness around children's chosen play is often a hand-me-down attitude straight from our parents.

## make the situation manageable

To make the situation manageable, you can ask your child to think of something else to play when it gets on your nerves. But, you'll need to open up some avenue for this kind of play. Children need this kind of play outlet for their feelings about, embarrassment about and their interest in their bodies and how they work. Their laughter helps them offload the tensions they have—or the ones they notice in us—around bodily functions. Special Time is an excellent tool for you in this regard: perhaps you set aside ten minutes each afternoon for Special Time, and make it clear that if your child wants to do potty talk, then Special Time is the time to do it. Then, enthusiastically jump in, focusing on your child's laughter and delight, trying not to pay too much attention to the words or proud displays of body parts that might kick up worries or other feelings for you. The part of the play your child is after is the laughter and the permission to try outrageous things with your support.

## be playful

Be playfully shocked, playfully insulted, or playfully dumb. If your child is trying to shock you with the word "vagina," for instance. "I have a vag...vag...vag-i-WHAT??". Do what lets your child laugh, and do it again and again. Personally, I love this kind of play—children show such delight in it, and they love it when an adult can enthusiastically join in.

I know one dad who created silly body part songs that he and his sons sang at the top of their lungs, amidst much giggling, whenever they went driving together in their van. When a child says "Butt!" you can say, equally enthusiastically, "Cabbage!" or perhaps more to the point, "Knuckle!" or "Thumb!" or "Chest!" Good playful snuggles are great with this kind of play. One good game is this: "Ohhh, there's that word 'butt' again! My heavens that word just jingles my brain! I think every time I hear 'butt,' I'm going to have to bring you a big fat kiss! Here it comes!"

This playful, affectionate kind of payback changes the game: you are seeking them out for a playful hug or kiss, and they are taunting you with the word that's fascinating to. They get to laugh. But the game turns to one of "Catch me if you can!" which is great for kids' confidence. They get to say the "word", while you get to protest and "get them back," but with affection; not with sternness or emotional distance. When you play this for ten or twenty minutes a day, it helps take the pressure off this kind of play for the rest of the time.



They need to know that the “butt” game isn’t for outside, or for Grandma’s house—unless you want to come to my place, where you’ll find a warm welcome for it. But give them this information some other time, when they’re not in the midst of the fun of the game. Information about boundaries goes down better while you’re making sandwiches or putting on their pajamas before bed. When they’re in the midst of play, their minds are concentrating on offloading tension, and the information doesn’t really stick.

you're a poo poo!

Right now, my five-year-old grandson’s favorite game for Special Time is this. He says, “OK, Mima, sit down in this nice chair here—you will be very comfortable. See how nice it is?” Then I sit down and remark on how peaceful I feel, and he says, “Pretty Mima, you’re a poo-poo!” and this gives me an excuse to run through the house, catch him and snuggle him vigorously. Of course, I protest wildly about not wanting to be a poo-poo while I’m running.

I’m modeling standing up for myself, but not in a serious way. He’s laughing and working on the name-calling “behavior infection” that all children catch when someone uses potty words with big emotional charge behind them. The laughter helps the children unload the tension that they have internalized from name-calling incidents, and the model of playful protest adds to the way the play creates healing and confidence.

You don’t need to worry that if you play in this way, your child will lose respect for you. You’ll get cooperation, love, and some fun. It’s not the “I’m the powerful adult and you have to do what I say” relationship that our parents usually thought they had to create with us. It’s an “I see you have some tension around this and I’ll help you so you don’t have to carry that tension from day to day” relationship. You don’t need to have this “I’ll help you with that behavior” relationship all the time: twenty minutes here and twenty minutes there, as needed, will suffice. Although you sometimes let him play that way, you don’t lose your authority, and your child knows that.

You’re still the person who decides when bedtime is, and the person who helps him learn his ABC’s. You can ask him not to use potty words at other times. If he continues, you can move close, and stay with him until he can proceed without crossing those boundaries. Perhaps he’ll need to have a cry with you before he can be free of that pull to rehearse the behavior that compels him so. Your child is much more likely to manage to be polite when it’s called for if you are able to hop in and enthusiastically join him in this kind of play, at least during Special Time. His self control will increase because he feels understood, cared for, and close to you.