



SEXUAL BEHAVIOR & CHILDREN:

When Is It a Problem & What To Do About It

The Harborview Abuse & Trauma Center can help children with sexual behavior problems. We can provide information, answer questions, give advice, and provide counseling for your child and family.

This handout was made to answer some of the many questions parents and caregivers have about child sexual behavior. Family and friends may also find this information helpful.

Children develop sexually, just as they develop physically, emotionally and socially. Sexual development begins at birth and continues through childhood. Even young children have sexual feelings and curiosity.

They engage in sexual behavior, such as touching their genitals or saying sexual words.

Sexual behavior becomes a problem when it is persistent, aggressive, occurs in public or involves other children in harmful ways. It can also be a problem if the child continues the behavior after adults try to help them change their behavior.

NOTE TO PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

Parents and caregivers need to know how to notice problem sexual behavior and what to do. This booklet is designed to give you the information you need to:

- Know what sexual behavior in children is normal and not normal.
- Be aware of some of the reactions you may have if you learn your child has a sexual behavior problem.
- Learn effective ways of correcting sexual misbehavior.

Children with sexual behavior problems are best served when parents and caregivers work together with professionals to find solutions.

TYPICAL SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

Normal sexual development happens gradually, but the process can vary among children. **When a child's development is slower or faster than others, it does not mean something is wrong.** Children have different personalities and experiences. Families have different values and practices.

The following are meant to be **guidelines only**. Your child's behavior may vary from what is described below.

0-5 Years

Young children are generally curious about their bodies and explore them. Touching their own sexual body parts is common and normal. Children are also curious about adult bodies and may try to touch adults' body parts, such as their parent's breasts. Children this age may be interested by bathroom activities and enjoy talking about or watching them.

At about age 4 or 5, sexual behavior becomes more social. Children may play games such as "doctor" in which they look at and touch one another's sexual body parts. By age 5, most children have asked some questions such as where babies come from, and about physical differences in body parts and functions.

At this age children may have heard sexual terms and slang for body parts and enjoy saying sexual words to get a reaction.

6-10 Years

Children continue to show interest in their bodies, but by this age they are more aware of the social rules for sexual talk and behavior. They also develop a sense of modesty and can be sensitive to being seen undressed or bathing. As a result, sexual behavior is more likely to be hidden from adults as children get older.

It is not unusual for children to play sex games with other children or to masturbate (touching their own sexual body parts). Jokes about body parts or sexual words can be funny to them. Children also become more curious about adult sexual behavior. Between ages 8-14, most children start puberty. They may have many questions and concerns about the changes that occur in puberty.

11-12 Years

Children may engage in experimental sexual activity with other children. Children may continue masturbating. Sexual behavior becomes even more private. At this time, children become increasingly aware of their own sexual desires that go along with puberty.

Children begin to develop an interest in romantic relationships. They may experience sexual or romantic attraction to others, and may have interest in "crushes," and sexual activity. Questions about sexuality may shift to different types of relationships, gender roles, sexual orientation, dating, and sexual health care.

PROBLEM SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

A child's sexual behavior can be a problem if it:

- is not expected for their stage of development,
- interferes with normal interests and activities,
- involves other children in a way that is upsetting,
- takes advantage of younger children, or
- involves pressure or force.

The most helpful response depends on the type of behavior. The behavior can often be changed with help from caring adults.

Behaviors that are public and disruptive, continue in spite of efforts to stop them, or bother or hurt other children are most likely to require professional help.

The following behaviors *do not* occur with most children. These are generally considered to be sexual behavior problems:

- Preoccupation with sexual words, sexual body parts and sexual activity, especially in school-age children.
- Repeated display of sexual body parts in public, especially in school-age children.
- Persistent, secretive sex play with other children after being told not to.
- Pretending to have sexual intercourse with toys, pets or other children.
- Doing sexual things with much younger children or children who have lower social or emotional skill levels.
- Pressuring or forcing others into sexual activity of any kind.

Why does this happen?

There are different reasons for sexual behavior problems in children. They can include:

- Confusion about what they see in media
- Inadequate supervision
- Sexualized environment in home
- No privacy in home
- Used to meet parental emotional needs
- Caregivers who act in sexual ways
- Environment where sex is paired with aggression
- Physical and emotional abuse, and neglect
- Made to observe sexual acts/engage in sexual acts for another's sexual pleasure
- Sexual abuse by physical contact to their bodies

However problematic sexual behavior begins, it can soon increase. It may continue because it feels good, or is calming or distracting. Some children may form a habit of touching their sexual body parts while watching TV or when they are nervous, without even realizing it. In other cases, sexual behavior continues because it gets attention or because it is forbidden and exciting.

Some children seem to develop strong sexual urges that they have trouble with self-control. Aggressive sexual behavior is most often seen in children who have other behavior problems and a lot of anger.

It is important to deal directly with the child's behavior as well as why it started. If the child has been sexually abused, exposed to sexually explicit behavior, or there are family problems, there is help for these too.

COMMON PARENT/CAREGIVER REACTIONS

In many cases, parents and caregivers are the first to notice that their child is behaving in a sexually unusual or inappropriate way. They may not be sure that it really is a problem or know what to do. Sometimes parents assume that the cause must be sexual abuse. Parents who are seriously concerned their child has been sexually abused should seek professional help.

Sometimes parents learn about their child's unusual sexual behavior from the parents of other children, childcare or school staff, or even the authorities. When parents haven't seen the child behaving in this way it can be hard to believe it happened. Parents usually feel embarrassed or upset. They may want to defend their child against accusations. A caregiver's reaction is important. Your reaction can be a factor in the child's sense of sexual self esteem and identity. Some common reactions include:

It did not happen. My child would not do that.

- Sexual misbehavior does not typically occur in front of adults. It is usually discovered by accident or because another child tells. It is unlikely that you would actually see your child sexually misbehaving. Children may lie when they are confronted because they don't want to get into trouble.
- If your child denies the behavior, keep an open mind about the possibility. Take it very seriously. It is harder for a child to admit wrongdoing when parents say that they cannot believe it could have happened. If your child did do it, they will need your help to prevent it from happening again.

It's not that big of a deal. People are overreacting.

- You may agree that something happened but feel as though the behavior is being exaggerated or blamed unfairly on your child. This can be true because many people are very sensitive about sexual behavior in children.
- You can try to understand exactly what happened. Find out how the person telling you knows about it. Reacting by saying your child did not do it or getting angry can make things worse. Let your child know that you will do what it takes to find out what happened and that you will help.

It's somebody else's fault.

- Parents sometimes respond by blaming someone else. Blaming other people does not solve the problem and tells the children that they do not have to take responsibility for what they did. It is important to separate what the child did from why it happened, and then deal with the problem directly.

I don't want anybody to find out about what my child did.

- Families sometimes stop social activities when they learn their child has a sexual behavior problem. Even though it is natural to want to do this, dealing with this is hard and families need support. Friends and relatives are usually helpful. The parents of your child's friends, and the childcare or school, will need to know so they can help.

The problem will go away by itself.

- Children need their parents' help to overcome sexual behavior problems. To do this, parents will need to learn how to change their children's behavior. It is best to talk with a counselor who specializes children's sexual behavior problems. Sometimes, when the behavior is less serious or does not involve other children, parents can get some suggestions on handling the behavior. Other times it will be necessary to go to counseling to find out why the child misbehaves and how to stop it.

Counseling will just make the problem worse by bringing up the issue again and again.

- Children with sexual behavior problems often think that what they are doing is ok. They may think that they did not really hurt the other child involved, or that the other child wanted it to happen. One goal of counseling is to change this kind of thinking. Only by talking about the sexual behavior can this thinking be heard and corrected. Our counselors have specific training in handling sexual behavior problems in children and working with families. Our Center can help.

My child needs help, not me.

- Counseling with children involves working with parents and caregivers for two reasons. First, children cannot solve behavior problems on their own. Second, parents and caregivers can make the most difference because they spend the most time with them. Counseling helps caregivers learn how to teach healthy behaviors. Sometimes a child's problems can remind parents of their own abuse or bring up other family problems or concerns. Counseling is an opportunity to get help with these concerns.

I don't want my child to be labeled or have a record.

- Young children are sometimes labeled as sex offenders which is not accurate or helpful. Children with sexual behavior problems can get help and can change their behavior.
- All professionals who work with children are required by law to report suspected child abuse to the Child Protective Service (CPS) or the police. When children engage in unusual or aggressive sexual behavior there can be concern that the child is being abused. CPS may get involved to determine whether children are safe. The police get involved when a crime may have been committed. In this case, your child may be interviewed by CPS or the police.

HELPING CHILDREN CHANGE THEIR BEHAVIOR

Making a Plan

If sexual behavior problems are dealt with quickly, there is no reason to believe that your child will have problems when they get older. Our counselors will help you learn the best ways to help your child. Our counselors will work with you to develop a plan, which could look something like this:

Step 1:

Find out which of your child's specific behaviors need to be changed, such as persistent sex play or pressuring a younger child to have sexual contact. Then look at **how often it has happened, what else goes on while it happens, and what need is being met for the child**. For example, your child may get attention for their behavior; it may feel good; or it may be a way of having control over others.

Step 2:

Make a plan to stop the behavior. What you do (ignoring, time-out or punishment) depends on how serious the behavior is. Be sure to tell your child what behavior you are concerned about and what you are going to do. Then follow through with it.

Also remember that sexual behavior problems are just one small part of a child's behavior. When adults seem to focus only on that issue, it can cause more shame for the child and additional judgment from the people around them.

Step 3:

Make a plan to praise positive behavior.

Together with your counselor, figure out what your child is getting from the sexual behavior and look for other ways to meet those needs. For example, if your child does not know how to tell people when they are angry, find ways to help them express their anger, such as talking about it or drawing pictures. If your child needs attention, give it when they are behaving well. Teach your child things to do to help control themselves, like asking for help, leaving the situation, or taking time to think before acting.

Step 4:

Protect your child and other children. When children cannot stop misbehaving on their own, don't give them chances to do it more. This means to watch them closely. Do not allow them to play with other children without adults around who know what to watch for. When children have proven they can behave, it may be possible to become more flexible.

Step 5:

Take care of yourself. You will be less able to help your child if you are overwhelmed. Talk to family and friends about your feelings, get advice from people you trust, consult your doctor or talk to your counselor. Even though this is a stressful time, try to stay focused on helping your child. In the long run, if you are handling the situation well, that will be the most help.

Promoting Healthy Sexuality

Taking care of the sexual behavior problems is the first step to helping your child develop normal, healthy sexuality. Children need correct information about how normal sexual development occurs. They need developmentally appropriate education about sex and sexual health. Here are some basic concepts and principles that can be helpful to share with children:

1. **Consent:** For younger children, teach how to ask others if they want to play or how they can share a toy. As they get older, give other examples about physical contact and sexual contact. These should always be between people who both want it, and who are able to consent.

2. **Boundaries:** Young children need simple rules that are easy to remember. Teach them when and where it's okay to touch others and themselves. As they get older, teach how to respect others' emotional boundaries and physical boundaries. Demonstrate this too.

3. **Accountability:** Teach your children how their behavior can impact others. If they cross a boundary, talk about it and show how they can make different choices. Children can develop a responsibility to care for both themselves and others. As they get older, talk together about what respect, communication, and consent looks like in romantic and sexual relationships.

It can be difficult to talk with children about sexuality. It can be helpful to seek advice from people you trust. You should also have access to what children are learning in school. There are great books and websites that can give guidance as well.

Recommended Reading

- Association of the Treatment of Sexual Abusers Taskforce. (2006) Report of the Task Force on Children with Sexual Behavior Problems: Executive Summary. [Report-TFCSBP.pdf \(atsa.com\)](#)
- Cavanaugh Johnson, T. (2016) Helping Children with Sexual Behavior Problems: A Guidebook for Professionals and Caregivers. [www.tcavjohn.com](#)
- Cavanaugh Johnson, T. (2015) Understanding Children's Sexual Behaviors: What's Natural and Healthy. [www.tcavjohn.com](#)
- Committee for Children. Early, Open, Often. Prevention Toolkit. [early-open-often-prevention-toolkit.pdf \(earlyopenoften.org\)](#)
- The National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth- [Home | National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth \(ncsby.org\)](#)
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network | \(nctsn.org\)](#)
- [AJ's Story About Not OK Touches | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(nctsn.org\)](#)
- Harborview Abuse & Trauma Center Resource- [A Safer Family, A Safer World \(uwhatc.org\)](#)
- AMAZE- Educational videos about various topics related to sexual health and development [\(amaze.org\)](#)