



A CHILD’S SEXUAL BEHAVIOR—WHEN SHOULD YOU BE CONCERNED?

What is normal sexual behavior?

Most behaviors related to sex and sexuality in young children are natural and healthy. Children develop sexually, just as they develop physically, emotionally, and socially. Sexual behavior is normal as long as it’s mutual and between children similar in age and size and doesn’t cause the child to feel angry, ashamed, or fearful. Sexual exploration should not be confused with sexual abuse.

Normal sexual behaviors include: touching/rubbing own genitals; mutual exploration (“playing doctor”); curiosity about body parts; interest in having babies; use of “dirty” words for bathroom and sexual functions; and interest in own feces. There is a continuum of “normal” sexual behavior that changes as the child develops.

What are concerning sexual behaviors?

- Preoccupation with sexual matters
- Too much sexual knowledge and information for child’s age
- Sexual behavior that is significantly different from same-age children.
- Persistent sexual behavior that continues even after clear requests to stop
- Children who seem unable to stop themselves from engaging in sexual activities
- Sexual behaviors that adversely affect other children
- Sexual behaviors that progress in frequency, intensity, or intrusiveness over time.
- Sexual behaviors that create fear, anxiety, shame, or guilt in a child
- Imitating or trying to have sexual intercourse with toys, pets, or other children
- Pressuring, coercing, or forcing other children into sexual activity
- Sexual behaviors which cause physical or emotional pain or discomfort to self or others (including putting objects into sexual body parts)
- Children who use sex to hurt others (including sexual language, gestures, and touching)
- Involving younger children in sexual activities

What do parents need to know?

It is important to remember that there is a normal, healthy way for children to develop sexually. Know what sexual behavior is normal and not normal. Parents and caregivers need to know how to spot problem sexual behavior and what to do if it happens. Sexual behavior problems are learned, usually from what children have seen or experienced. This means that the behavior can be changed with help from caring adults.

If you have any questions or concerns about your child’s behavior, contact the Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress at (206) 521-1800.

**HARBORVIEW CENTER FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT
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