

Sexual Behavior and Children: When Is It a Problem and What To Do About It

The Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress has services to help families of children with sexual behavior problems. We can provide information, answer questions, give advice and guidance, and arrange counseling for your child and entire family.

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

Find out if your child has a sexual behavior problem. Do not use this information to try and treat your child without the help of a counselor or mental health professional.

Children develop sexually, just as they develop physically, emotionally and socially. This process begins at birth and continues through childhood. Even young children have sexual feelings and engage in sexual behavior (such as touching their sex parts or saying dirty words).

But sometimes, 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 family does not consider the behavior normal or acceptable.

Note to Parents

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.

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 you 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.

Progression of Normal Sexual Development

Normal sexual development happens gradually, but the process can vary among children. Just because a child's development is slower or faster than others does not mean something is wrong. Children have different characteristics, temperament 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.

Zero to Five 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 adult sexual body parts, such as their mother's breasts. Children this age may be interested by bathroom activities and enjoy talking about or watching them. At about age four or five 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 five, most children have asked some questions about sex, such as where babies come from, physical differences between males and females, body organs and functions, and the coming of another baby.

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

Six to Ten Years. Children continue their 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 very sensitive to being seen undressed or bathing. As a result, sexual behavior is more likely to be hidden from adults as children become older. It is not unusual for children to play sex games with other children or masturbate (touching their sexual body parts). Telling dirty jokes or saying sexual words can be a source of

amusement. Children also become increasingly curious about adult sexual behavior. By age 10, many children are showing the first signs of puberty, and their interest in what this means increases.

Eleven to Twelve Years. Children may engage in experimental sexual activity with other children. Sometimes this involves children of the same sex. 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. Sexually related activity may involve hand holding, kissing and fondling. Questions about sexuality may shift to the process of birth and concerns about the father's role in pregnancy and marriage.

Problem Sexual Behavior

A child's sexual behavior can be a problem if it is out of the ordinary for his or her stage of development, interferes with normal interests and activities, involves other children in a way that is upsetting, takes advantage of children who are younger, or involves pressure or force. The nature of the behavior determines what the most helpful response should be and whether the authorities and professionals will become involved. 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 and are generally considered to be sexual behavior problems:

- Preoccupation with sexual words, sexual body parts and sexual activity, especially when seen in school-age children.
- Repeated display of sexual body parts in public, especially when seen in school-age children.
- Persistent, secretive sex play with other children after being told not to.
- Putting objects in sexual body parts.
- Imitating or trying to have sexual intercourse with toys, pets or other children.
- Doing sexual things with much younger children or children who are emotionally or socially at a much younger stage of development.
- Pressuring or forcing others into sexual activity of any kind.

Why Does this Happen?

There are different causes of sexual behavior problems in children. Since sexual behavior is learned, in most cases it is the result of what children have seen or experienced. Children may see sexual behavior of parents, older siblings or baby sitters, or on television and in magazines. Some children who are sexually abused act out sexually or become sexualized. In families where there is a lot of conflict or stress, children may begin to act in sexual ways. Other factors may contribute to sexual behavior problems, including trouble controlling impulses, difficulty getting along with others, or not being watched closely enough by parents or caregivers.

However unusual sexual behavior begins, it can soon take on a life of its own. It may continue because it feels good, or is calming or distracting. Some children may develop a habit of touching their sexual body parts while watching TV or when they are nervous, without even realizing they are doing it. In other cases, sexual behavior continues because it gets attention (usually in the form of a shocked reaction from adults) or because it is forbidden and exciting to other children.

Some children seem to develop strong sexual urges that they have trouble controlling by themselves. Aggressive sexual behavior is most often seen in children who have other behavior problems and a lot of anger and hostility.

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, these problems need to be addressed as well.

Common Parental Reactions

In many cases, parents are the first ones 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 about it. Sometimes parents assume that the cause must be sexual abuse. Since this is a common cause of unusual sexual behavior, the possibility of sexual abuse is important to consider but is not necessarily the only explanation. Parents who are seriously concerned their child has been sexually abused should seek immediate professional help.

Sometimes parents learn about their child's unusual sexual behavior from the parents of other children, day care or school workers, Child Protective Services or even the police. When parents haven't actually seen the child behaving in this way it can be hard to believe it really happened. Parents usually feel embarrassed or upset. It is also normal for them to want to defend their child against accusations. *Some common reactions include:*

It did not happen. My child would not do that. Sexual misbehavior does not typically occur in front of adults and is usually discovered by accident or because another child tells. Because it is unlikely that you would actually see your child misbehaving, do not think that it could not have happened. 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 and 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, she or he 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. The most important thing to do is to stay calm and find out 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 will make things worse for your child. 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 seeing friends, or going to church, once they learn their child has a sexual behavior problem. Even though it is natural to want to do this, dealing with these kinds of behavior problems is hard, and families need support. Friends and relatives are usually very helpful. The parents of your child's friends, and the day care or school, will need to know so they can help you make sure it doesn't happen again.

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 in working with children on these types of 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. Part of the 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. *We can help with this problem.*

My child needs help, not me. Counseling with children involves working with parents and caregivers as well, for two reasons. First, children cannot solve behavior problems on their own. Second, parents and caregivers can make the most difference because they know their children the best and spend the most time with them. Counseling helps parents and caregivers learn what to do and how to teach healthy behaviors. Sometimes a child's problems can remind parents of their own abuse experiences 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 have a record with CPS or with the court. 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 is concern that the child is being abused or that something is wrong at home. CPS needs to 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 to Help Children Change Their Behavior

If sexual behavior problems are dealt with quickly, there is no reason to believe that your child will have problems when he or she gets older. Our counselors will help you learn the best ways to help your child change his or her behavior.

Our counselors will work with you to develop a plan to help your child with his or her sexual behavior problem. Do not try to develop a plan by yourself; children with sexual behavior problems need professional assistance. Your plan could look 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 to have sexual contact. Then look at how often it has happened, what else goes on while it happens, and what reward the child gets from it. For example, your child may get attention for his/her 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.

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 he or she is angry, find ways to help him or her express her anger, such as talking about it or drawing pictures. If your child needs attention, give it when he or she is behaving well. Teach your child things to do to help control himself or herself, like asking for help, leaving the situation, or taking time to think things through before acting.

Step 4. Protect your child and other children. When children cannot stop misbehaving on their own, don't give them chances to continue misbehaving. This means watching them closely, not allowing 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 angry, depressed or 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 and strengthening your family. 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 and when developmentally appropriate, to be educated about sex and reproduction. It is important for families to talk about when they think it is right for people to have sexual relationships. These are some basic principles many people believe about sexual relationships:

1. Sexual relationships should always be between people who both want it.
2. Sexual relationships are best when they happen as part of a meaningful and caring relationship.
3. People in sexual relationships need to be old enough and responsible enough to accept whatever could happen as a result, such as pregnancy.

Many parents find it difficult to talk with their children about sexuality and sexual relationships, even though they know they should. But it is very important for parents to take the major responsibility for educating their children. Parents can get help on how to do this from their doctor, friends or church. Movies, books and programs are also available.

Moving Forward

Most of the time children's sexual behavior problems can be helped while living at home with their families. Only a few children will have problems that are so serious or not easily helped by counselors that they must be removed from their family or placed in a special treatment center. Parents working together with professionals are the best help to children in solving sexual behavior problems.

Recommended Reading

Dishion, Thomas J. & Patterson, Scot G. *Preventive Parenting with Love, Encouragement and Limits*. Eugene, Oregon: Castalia Publishing Co., 1996.

Frankle, Fred. *Good Friends Are Hard to Find*. Los Angeles: Perspective Publishing, 1996.

Garber, Stephen W., Marianne Daniels Garber, Robyn Freedman Spizman. *Good Behavior*. New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 1987.

Our mission is to prevent and counter the harmful effects of traumatic experiences on victims, families and our community. These experiences include sexual and physical abuse and neglect of children, rape, sexual harassment, violent crime, accidents and disasters. Services reflect the values, beliefs and traditions of our community and are available to people of all ages. We strive to create a society free of interpersonal violence.

Established in 1973, Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress helps victims of sexual assault and traumatic stress, and their families. We also help families concerned with their children's sexual behavior problems. As a program of Harborview Medical Center, we offer medical care and information, individual and group counseling, as well as advocacy services and referrals. Washington State Accredited Community Sexual Assault Program.

This project was supported in part by Contract No. 96-309-116 from the Office of Crime Victims Advocacy, Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development, State of Washington.