



Sexual Behaviour in Children

Just as language acquisition, motor development, and cognitive development are a natural part of growth and learning in children, so too is sexual development. Although children are not ‘sexual’ beings in the way adult sexuality is seen, they do go through a number of different stages of sexual development, most of which are a natural and healthy part of growing up and learning about their bodies and their world.

Young children (2 – 5 years) may exhibit some sexual behaviours that would be considered very unusual in children over the ages of six, such as putting their mouth on their mothers breast or playing with themselves in public. The reason these behaviours tend to reduce when children reach approximately six years of age is due to a combination of their developmental stage, including where embarrassment is usually present around nudity, as well as the socialisation process children go through in social settings such as schools, as they learn what is and is not acceptable in social situations.

Sexual behaviours in children

Natural and healthy sexual exploration by children is an information gathering process, whereby children explore each others bodies by looking and touching (like playing doctor) and also explore gender roles (like playing house), with the vast majority of children engaging in these behaviours at different developmental points in childhood.

When this exploration is with children of a similar age, developmental status and participation is voluntary, this can be considered natural and healthy sexual exploration.

Although siblings engage in mutual exploration, mostly this exploration is between children who have an existing friendship.

The sexual play occurs over several periods in child’s development, and is limited in type and frequency.

Curiosity in sex and sexuality is also balanced with curiosity with other aspects of their life. Children often feel embarrassment, but not usually feelings of shame, fear, anxiety or anger about the sexual exploration.

If children are discovered in an act of sexual exploration by adults, they are instructed to stop and their behaviour is monitored, this behaviour most often diminishes.

Common sexual behaviours in children between the ages of 3 – 5 years and uncommon in children 6 years and over:

- Touches mums breasts
- Touches own private parts in front of others
- Stands too close to people
- Kisses other children
- Shows private parts to same-ages peers

Sexual behaviours common in all children:

- Trying to look at people who are nude
- Touches own private parts in private
- Interested in opposite sex
- Masturbation



Sexual behaviours uncommon in children of any age:

- Masturbation with an object (doll, hair brush, chair)
- Tries to have intercourse with others
- Touches animals private parts
- Draws pictures of private parts
- Asks others to do sexual acts on them
- Pretends toys are having sex
- Places objects in the anus or vagina

**Characteristics of problematic sexual behaviours:**

- Children engaged in the behaviours don't have an ongoing friendship – as sexual play is usually an extension of regular play behaviour
- Sexual behaviours are engaged in with younger or older children to the child – generally the wider the age gap the larger the concern
- Children have too much knowledge about sexuality than would be expected of their age – when children have been exposed to explicit adult sexuality, pornography, poor boundaries, or sexual assault they may display sexual knowledge beyond their years.
- Sexual behaviours continue in spite of clear, consistent requests to stop – when these behaviours continue despite parental requests to stop or even punishment, the behaviours may be a conscious or unconscious method of indicating they need help.

Reducing problematic sexualised behaviours:

It is very important when trying to reduce sexualised behaviours in children not to make the child feel shameful about their behaviours. Negative comments such as 'That is disgusting' or 'Don't be a dirty boy/girl' can cause a child to feel that *they* are disgusting or dirty, which can compound the problem. When working to reduce problematic sexualised behaviours be sure to remain consistent, and use a calm tone of voice. It is important to convey to the child that they are not in trouble for their actions, but that you wish them to stop what they are doing.

To reduce these behaviours:

1. **Address behaviour** in a short, direct but calm way e.g. "no touching privates" or "Hand's out of pants".
- 2a. **Redirect behaviour** – "Would you like to play with your doll here, or your blocks?"
- 2b. **Distract** - "Let's go read a book together hey?" "Come up here and see what mum's making for dinner" "Come up here and let's colour in"
3. **Praise for good behaviour** - Remember to PRAISE your child when they are NOT displaying sexualised behaviours, so they receive attention for good behaviour also.



"Protecting children against sexual assault"

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