

## HEALTHY SEXUALITY IN CHILDREN & TEENS

Sexuality is a part of every human regardless of age. Below is just a partial list of sexual behaviors in children. Typical and common behaviors should be *spontaneous, mutual and good-humored* and are considered a healthy part of psychological, social and sexual development.

Your culture, upbringing and values all impact how you think and feel about children and sexuality. You don't need to be comfortable with these things, just aware that many behaviors are considered typical and common. If you find a child or children engaged in sexual behavior, remember to calmly address the situation, remind them about the rules and re-direct their behavior.

Typical and healthy sexual behaviors are also called "sex play" and I strongly recommend you avoid using it when talking with parents. Say "playing doctor" or "checking out privates." If you say "sex play" they will probably become overly alarmed.

Another thing to remember, sexual behaviors aren't necessarily traumatic and do not always indicate sexual abuse has occurred.

### TYPICAL & HEALTHY BEHAVIORS

**Involves:** Bodies, touch, games, gender identification, self-pleasure and masturbation.

- Spontaneous
- Mutual
- Good humored
- Good friends

### SEXUALIZED BEHAVIORS

- Adult-like
- High adult concern
- Learned
- Not friends
- Sneaking or screening
- Repeated

**Cause for concern:** Imitating adults sexually, sex play using force, threats, dominance, violence, aggression, and/or compulsiveness.

Concerning behaviors can often indicate a child has been exposed to pornography and is trying to make sense of what they have seen by acting out with another child.

## ASSESSMENT TOOLS

### G.R.A.M.S. (childhood)

- ✓ Good Humored? Good Friends?
- ✓ Repeated?
- ✓ Adult-like?  
Adult concern?
- ✓ Mutual?
- ✓ Spontaneous? Sneaking?

### E.R.A. (adolescence)

- ✓ Explicit?
- ✓ Repeated?
- ✓ Adult Concern?

## AGE-SPECIFIC SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

*Adapted from Wurtele, S.K. and Miller-Perrin, C.L. (1992) Preventing Sexual Abuse. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.*

### PRESCHOOL AGE (0 to 5) - Early Childhood

**Common:** Sexual language relating to differences in body parts, bathroom talk, pregnancy and birth. Self-pleasure at home and in public. Showing and looking at private body parts.

**Uncommon:** Discussion of specific sexual acts or explicit sexual language. Adult-like sexual contact with other children.

### SCHOOL-AGE (6 to 12) – 1st to 6th grade

This group may include both pre-pubescent children and children who have already entered puberty, when hormonal changes are likely to trigger an increase in sexual awareness and interest.

#### *Pre-pubescent children (6 to 12) – 1st to 6th grade*

**Common:** Questions about relationships and sexual behavior, menstruation and pregnancy. Experimentation with same-age children, often during games, kissing, touching, exhibitionism and role-playing. Masturbation in private.

**Uncommon:** Adult-like sexual interactions, discussing specific sexual acts, masturbating in public.

#### *After puberty begins (9 to 12) – 4th to 6th grade*

**Common:** Increased curiosity about sexual materials and information, questions about relationships and sexual behavior, using sexual words and discussing sexual acts, particularly with peers. Increased experimenting including open-mouthed kissing, body-rubbing, fondling. Masturbating in private.

**Uncommon:** Repeated adult-like sexual behavior, including oral/genital contact and intercourse; masturbating in public.

## **ADOLESCENCE (13 to 16) – 7th to 10th grade**

**Common:** Questions about decision making, social relationships, and sexual customs; masturbation in private; experimenting between adolescents of the same age, including open-mouthed kissing, fondling and body rubbing, oral/genital contact. Voyeuristic behaviors are common in this age group. Regular pornography use. Intercourse occurs among approximately one third of children in this age group.

**Uncommon:** Masturbating in public. Sexual interest directed toward much younger children.

***When you understand the common behaviors for each age group it makes it easier to determine if a child's behavior is typical for their age.*** Remember to trust your gut and check in with another adult if you are unsure.

## **WHAT TO DO & SAY WHEN CHILDREN ENGAGE IN SEXUAL BEHAVIORS**

The goal is to remain in communication with the children. You *want* them to tell you what's going on so, no yelling, shaming or belittling allowed! You can have your freakout later.

Rule number one? Stay calm. Use the following script to address their behavior in the moment. Remember to be kind and firm.

## **SCRIPT FOR TALKING TO KIDS**

### **P-DNA\***

**Pause & Poker Face & BREATHE!**

**Describe...** *"I see..."* or *"I heard..."*

**Name...** Feeling and Rule *"I feel uncomfortable and the rule is it is not okay and not safe to play this way."*

**Action...** *"I need you to..."* or *"Let's go..."*

**Then...**

**Redirect** — Help kids find something else to do.

**Regroup** (G.R.A.M.S.) — What just happened?

**Plan** — Discuss with kids individually. Document. Decide: Talk to Parents? Contact authorities? Other professional consultation? Call Amy?

\*Adapted from ConsciousDiscipline.com

**Other assessment questions** — these are some other rough guidelines to consider before approaching the child/children:

- a. Is the behavior developmentally normal?
- b. Are the children the same age/size?
- c. Is the play mutual or coercive (threats, intimidation, bribery)?
- d. Is secrecy or natural privacy the quality of the play?
- e. Is the play compulsive or obsessive?

### **“3 STRIKES” RULE**

If you work with children, your authority as a teacher should stop the behavior with one or two corrections, if the behavior is “natural and healthy.” If you have a third incident, contact a professional.

No matter what, you must document all sexual behavior, even if it is considered typical and healthy. This is what can save your butt if there is an accusation of abuse in your workplace.

**As a mandated reporter, it is your legal duty to call social services, the police or the authorities if you suspect abuse.** I believe every adult should behave as though they are a mandated reporter.

### **WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?**

**Sexual activity with a child by an adult, adolescent or older child for their own sexual pleasure.** Older child refers to: size, age (3+ yrs), developmental age difference, status (babysitter), type of sexual activity (developmentally appropriate) and/or problematic dynamics.

**Besides sexual contact, it includes non-contact acts such as:**

- Exposure to private body parts.
- Exposure to pornography.
- Voyeurism (spying or “Peeping Tom” behaviors).
- Communicating in a sexual manner by phone or internet including text, instant or personal messaging, on social media or email.

**It can be an agonizing and traumatic experience for its victims, but not always.** Sexual abuse can feel good to the victim and can be very confusing because of this.

### **BEHAVIORAL WARNING SIGNS A CHILD MAY HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED**

Generally speaking, pay attention to any change in behavior in a child. Physical signs are rarer and hard to catch. And remember, these are also the signs of trauma.

- Nightmares, trouble sleeping, fear of the dark, or other sleeping problems.
- Extreme fear of “monsters.”
- Spacing out at odd times.
- Loss of appetite, or trouble eating or swallowing. Sometimes eating disorders.
- Sudden mood swings: rage, fear, anger, or withdrawal.
- Fear of certain people or places (e.g., a child may not want to be left alone with a baby-sitter, a friend, a relative, or some other child or adult; or a child who is usually talkative and cheery may become quiet and distant when around a certain person).
- Stomach illness all of the time with no identifiable reason.
- An older child behaving like a younger child, such as bed-wetting or thumb sucking.
- Sexual activities with toys or other children, such as simulating sex with dolls or asking other children/siblings to behave sexually.
- New words for private body parts.
- Refusing to talk about a "secret" they have with an adult or older child.
- Talking about a new older friend.
- Suddenly having money.
- Cutting or burning themselves as an adolescent.

### **PHYSICAL WARNING SIGNS A CHILD MAY HAVE BEEN ABUSED**

Does a child close to you have:

- Unexplained bruises, redness, or bleeding of the child's genitals, anus, or mouth?
- Pain at the genitals, anus, or mouth?
- Genital sores or milky fluids in the genital area?

If you said "yes" to any of these examples bring the child to a doctor or contact the authorities. They can help you understand what may be happening and help you develop a plan to get the child further help.

If the child needs therapy, be sure to seek out a therapist who is trained in trauma and sexual abuse specifically. At RAINN.org you can find a therapist referral through a sexual assault center in your area.

If you have any questions about these or other signs and symptoms, please call the Stop It Now! Toll-Free Helpline at 1-888-PREVENT.

## **HELPING KIDS HELP THEMSELVES**

One of the best approaches to protecting children against sexual abuse is to help them protect themselves. To do this, they need awareness, knowledge and skills:

- **Impress on children that "Your body is your own, and you have the right to say 'no' if anyone touches you in a way you don't like."**
- **Explain the difference between safe and unsafe touching.** Tell children that safe touch feels comforting, pleasant and welcome. Examples might be hugging or cuddling - as long as it is appropriate and with permission. Unsafe touch hurts physically or is uncomfortable like being pinched; having someone touch your penis/vulva when you don't want them to; a hug that is too tight - or forced upon them.
- **Allow children to decide whether they want to give or receive hugs and kisses.** Insisting that Jimmy kiss grandpa is unfair. Offer affection to youngsters rather than impose it. Substitute "Can I have (or give you) a hug?" for "Give me a hug." This helps children feel a sense of control over their body.
- **Emphasize that no adult or older child has the right to touch a child's privates or to ask a child to touch their genitals.** Explain that this includes caregivers and family members. "I need you to tell me if that ever happens. It's important that you let me know... and not be worried that I might be upset."
- **Tell children they do not have to blindly obey all adults.** "It's wrong for a grown-up to ask you to lie or steal. It is wrong for a grown-up to touch you, or ask to be touched, in the unsafe ways we talked about. You should say 'no,' then come tell me."
- **Read books about bodies and safety as part of your regular reading time.** *It's MY Body - A book about uncomfortable touch* and *I Can Play It Safe* are two of my favorites. Books make these conversations easier and not scary.
- **Make sure your environment is safe and is free of places children can hide and play inappropriate games.** This means no tents, closets, houses or other structures where kids can be sneaky and hide.
- **Have a dress code at your childcare or school.** The work of childhood is play. Children need to come to school dressed for play, not for church. This means no flip-flops, high heels, short skirts, t-shirts with mature or violent themes. Have shoes and clothing available if families "forget" the rules.
- **Use the correct names for private body parts.** Children have a right to know the correct names and using and teaching them helps to keep them safer from child sexual abuse.

## **REFERENCES & RESOURCES**

Stop It Now! (2011). *Warning Signs of Possible Child Sexual Abuse in a Child's Behavior*. Retrieved from [http://www.stopitnow.org/warning\\_signs\\_child\\_behavior](http://www.stopitnow.org/warning_signs_child_behavior). Find this and more helpful info and handouts on their site.

Larsson, I. (2000). *Sexual Abuse of Children: Child Sexuality and Sexual Behavior*. Retrieved from <http://www.jeanyveshayez.net/tele-pdf/larsson.pdf>. Excellent and concise information about these issues.

Johnson, T. C. (2014). *Understanding Children's Sexual Behaviors: What's Natural and Healthy*. South Pasadena, CA: Toni Cavanagh Johnson. <http://www.tcavjohn.com/>. You can order this booklet online - I highly recommend it!

Wurtele, S.K. and Miller-Perrin, C.L. (1992) *Preventing Sexual Abuse*. Great resource!

de Becker, G. (200) *Protecting the Gift: Keeping Children and Teenagers Safe (and Parents Sane)*. One of the best books ever written about personal safety.

[StopItNow.org](http://StopItNow.org) — Sexual abuse prevention information.

[RAINN.org](http://RAINN.org) — For therapist referrals in your area.

[BirdsAndBeesAndKids.com](http://BirdsAndBeesAndKids.com) — My site for parents.

[BBKPros.com](http://BBKPros.com) — My site for professionals who work with kids.

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## **BIRDS & BEES & KIDS CLASSES for PROFESSIONALS**

- Sexual Behavior in Children & Teens: What's Okay & When to Worry
- Understanding the New World of Gender & Sexual Orientation
- Kid-safe Workplace: Red Flags & Warning Signs in Adults

Get details at [BBKPros.com](http://BBKPros.com)

Interested in learning about how to bring me in for training?

Give me a call or send an email and let's chat!

206-661-2245

[Amy@BirdsandBeesandKids.com](mailto:Amy@BirdsandBeesandKids.com)



## IS IT COMMON OR CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

1. **When 5-year-old Jimmy comes over to play with 5-year-old Billy,** he takes Billy's 3-year-old sister into a room, closes the door and pulls her pants down. He does this every time he comes over to play. COMMON? \_\_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_\_
2. **A brother, 3, and sister, 5, love to take baths together.** While they are splashing around and playing the sister playfully touches her brother's penis.  
COMMON? \_\_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_\_
3. **A 10-year-old boy has his hand down his pants** every day during silent reading time.  
COMMON? \_\_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_\_
4. **Two 4-year-old girls love to play midwife** and take turns putting dolls under their dresses, lying down pretending to give birth. They use the word vagina and know a lot about pregnancy and birth. COMMON? \_\_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_\_
5. **A 4-year-old touches her vulva every chance she gets,** including rubbing against other people. COMMON? CONCERNING? \_\_\_\_
6. **A 3-year-old is playing with a baby doll.** They take off its clothes and kiss its forehead, mouth, stomach and penis. They are careful and serious.  
COMMON? \_\_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_\_
7. **Two kids ages 7 and 8 are playing in a tent in the backyard.** They decide to get ready for "bed" and take off their clothes. This leads to checking out each other's privates.  
COMMON? \_\_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_\_
8. **A pair of 12-year-olds are dating** and have had oral sex a couple of times.  
COMMON? \_\_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_\_
9. **A 15-year-old boy has a crush on a very mature looking 11-year-old girl.** He talks and flirts with her regularly and wants to ask her to go on a date.  
COMMON? \_\_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_\_