

Childhood Sexual Behaviours



NEW

Please email us any
comments or suggestions you
have on this new leaflet.

education@sexualabuse.org.nz
Thank you!

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The children depicted in this leaflet are models.

References:

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What is considered normal?

We live in an age when childhood sexual abuse and victimisation is increasingly on our minds. It is important for parents and caregivers to understand what is normal sexual development and behaviour in children and teenagers. This is the key to understanding which behaviours might signal that a child is a victim of sexual abuse, or is acting in a sexually inappropriate manner towards others.

Sexual development and sexual play are natural and healthy aspects of growing up, from toddlers through childhood and into adolescence. For infants and toddlers, this usually involves body sensations, cuddling and touch. Even in the earliest days, male babies and toddlers touch and rub their own genitals, and even as infants boys experience erections.

By early school age (5-7), children are interested in body parts and functions. Some sexual play may begin, and concepts of love and affection begin to develop, evolving into behaviours that continue developing into later childhood (8-9 years old).

Pre-adolescent children (ages 10-12) are more focused on social relationships and expectations, and begin to experience more defined sexual feelings. Children touch, fondle, and rub their own genitals throughout childhood, but they begin to more clearly masturbate during this time, developing clearer patterns into and beyond puberty (ages 12/13 and up).

By puberty and adolescence, body parts and sexual organs are developing, and puberty brings the onset of menstruation in girls and more routine masturbation for both boys and girls, but especially boys. As children move further into adolescence, romance, intimacy, and sexual issues are driven by and blend with physical feelings, emotions, and social expectations. Dating and more intense sexual relationships begin and deepen, moving from thinking about and discussing romances, to dating, kissing, sexual petting, and, in many cases, sexual relationships and intercourse.

It is important to distinguish between age appropriate and age inappropriate sexual behaviours. Many children engage in sexual behaviours and show sexual interests throughout their childhood, even though they have not yet reached puberty. However, normal sexual behaviours are usually not openly sexual, are more exploratory and playful in nature, do not show a preoccupation with sexual interactions, and are not hostile, aggressive, or hurtful to self or others.

Sexual development and sexual play are natural and healthy in children.

It is important distinguish between age appropriate and age inappropriate sexual behaviours.

Inappropriate sexual experience

As with other areas of growth, children's sexual behaviour develops over time, and many behaviours are normal for children at certain ages. On the other hand, there are sexual behaviours that we should be concerned about and that should not be ignored or seen as child's play.

These sexual behaviours are more serious and may be harmful to the child and others. However, when a child engages in sexual behaviours, it can be difficult to decide when the behaviour is natural and healthy, and when it may reflect a problem or disturbance.

“There are sexual behaviours that should not be ignored”

Childhood and adolescent behaviours are of concern when they are extensive or suggest preoccupation, or involve others in ways that are not consensual. Sexual behaviours in children present a special concern when they appear as prominent features in a child's life, or when their sexual play or behaviours are not welcomed by other children involved in the play. This is the point when sexual behaviour can become harmful and aggressive.

For children aged below 11, we consider all forms of sexual activity with adolescents and adults inappropriate, especially for children aged 10 and younger.

This includes:

- all forms of sexual activity with adolescents and adults;
- viewing pornography or other sexually explicit material;
- witnessing sexual behaviours between adults, adolescents, or other children;
- excessive sexual play with a same-age or older child who has more sophisticated sexual knowledge;
- any situation in which a child is exposed to inappropriate sexual acts.

Sexually reactive children

“Sexually Reactive” children are usually pre-pubescent boys and girls who have been exposed to inappropriate sexual activities. A sexually reactive child may engage in a variety of age-inappropriate sexual behaviours. This may be as a result of his or her own exposure to sexual experiences. The child may begin to act out, or engage in, sexual behaviours or relationships that include excessive sexual play. They may make inappropriate sexual comments or gestures, or engage in mutual sexual activity with other children, or sexual touching and abuse of other children.

Sexually reactive children may react to their experience of sexual activities by:

- demonstrating precocious sexualised gestures, language, and knowledge;
- engaging in extensive mutual sexual play with same age or younger children;
- engaging in excessive masturbation or demonstrating a preoccupation with sexual activities and ideas;
- engaging in sexual behaviours in public, such as exhibitionism, rubbing, or masturbation;
- interest in or attempting sexual contact with older children, adolescents, adults, or animals;
- engaging in or attempting significant sexual encounters with same age or younger children, including masturbation, oral sex, digital penetration, and intercourse;
- sexually touching others, and especially younger children.

It can be difficult to decide when a behaviour is natural and healthy.



Signs of sexual disturbance

Toni Cavanagh Johnson (1999), a psychologist specialising in childhood sexual development, identifies signs for concern in children up to the age of about 12. She states that children's sexual behaviours and interests should be similar to those of other same-age children. However, children may be showing signs of sexual disturbance when they:

- are preoccupied with sexual play rather than engaging in many other forms of play;
- engage in sexual play with much younger or much older children;
- have knowledge of sex inappropriate for their age;
- are unwilling to stop sexual play when told to by an adult;
- engage in sexual play that leads to complaints from or has a negative effect on other children;
- engage in sexual play causing physical or emotional discomfort to themselves or others;
- sexualise relationships, or see others as objects for sexual interactions;
- are aged 4 and older but fail to understand the rights and boundaries of other children in sexual play;
- experience fear, shame, or guilt in their sexual play;
- engage in adult-type sexual activities with other children;
- direct sexual behaviours toward older adolescents or adults;
- engage in sexual activities with animals;
- use sex to hurt others;
- use bribery, threats, or force to engage other children in sexual play.

Parents should be aware of the possibility of sexual disturbance.



There are many excellent books and other media that explain and discuss healthy sexual development in children and adolescents. Parents who are unsure about childhood behaviours should take the time to learn about childhood sexual development. This will help them understand their children and become aware of the possibility of sexual disturbance at an early stage.

Problems in children aged 2–12

Understanding children's typical sexual development, knowledge, and behaviour is necessary to accurately identify sexual behaviour problems in children.

Research on sexual behaviour in children aged 2 to 12 documents that:

- a wide range of sexual behaviours for this age range are normal and non-problematic;
- increasing numbers of school age children are being identified with inappropriate or aggressive sexual behaviour. It is not clear if this increase reflects an increase in the actual number of cases or an increase in identification and reporting;
- several treatment interventions have been found to be effective in reducing problematic sexual behaviour in children, such as cognitive behavioural group treatment;
- sexual development and behaviour are influenced by social, familial, and cultural factors, as well as genetics and biology.

Typical sexual knowledge of children aged 2–6 years old:

- understand that boys and girls have different genitals;
- may know labels for sexual body parts, but use slang words such as weenie for penis;
- have limited information about pregnancy and childbirth.

Typical sexual knowledge of children aged 7 to 12 years old:

- may know the correct names for the genitals but use slang terms;
- have increased knowledge about masturbation, intercourse, and pregnancy; and
- may begin to understand the physical aspects of puberty by around age 10.



Common sexual behaviours

Sexual behaviours commonly observed in girls and boys

Ages 2–6	Ages 7–12
Does not have a strong sense of modesty, enjoys own nudity	Sexual play with children they know, such as playing 'doctor'
Uses 'toilet' words with peers	Interested in sexual content in media (TV, movies, radio)
May explore body differences between girls and boys	Touches own genitals at home, in private
Curious about private parts	Looks at nude pictures
Touch their private parts, even in public	Interested in the opposite sex or has close same-sex friendships
Exhibits sex play with peers and siblings; plays 'doctor' or 'mothers and fathers'	Shy about undressing
Experiences pleasure from touching their genitals (more likely in boys)	Shy around unfamiliar men



Infrequent sexual behaviours

Children with sexual behaviour problems are those who demonstrate developmentally inappropriate or aggressive sexual behavior. This includes frequent public masturbation, and intrusive or aggressive sexual behaviour towards others. It may include coercion or force. Although the term “sexual” is used, the child’s intentions and motivations for these behaviours may be unrelated to sexual gratification.

Some children who have been sexually abused have inappropriate sexual behaviours. However, it is important to note that many children who have been sexually abused do not show inappropriate or aggressive sexual behaviours.

Sexual behaviours infrequently reported in children ages 2–12

Puts mouth on private parts	Asks to engage in sex acts
Puts objects in rectum or vagina	Imitates intercourse
Masturbates with objects	Undresses other people
Touches others’ private parts even after being told not to	Asks to watch or is found watching sexually explicit television or material
Touches adults’ private parts	Makes sexual sounds

Professionals and parents may have concerns about whether the behaviour is problematic and when an incident should be reported to Child, Youth and Family (CYF). Here are some suggestions:

- do not overreact as most sexual behaviours in children are within the typical or expected range;
- inappropriate or problematic sexual behavior in children is not a clear indicator that a child has been sexually abused, but it does raise the question;
- most children will stop the behaviour if they are told the rules, mildly restricted, well supervised, and praised for appropriate behaviour;
- if the sexual behaviour is problematic, referral to CYF is recommended (Freephone 0508 FAMILY - 0508 326 459);
- it is important to remember that children with problematic sexual behaviour and who get appropriate help are less likely to become adolescent or adult sex offenders;
- you may call the Sexual Abuse Centre for advice 07 348 1555.

Sexual play

Professionals in the field have identified a continuum of sexual behaviours that range from common sexual play to problematic sexual behaviour. Some of these are described below.

Sexual play

- is exploratory and spontaneous;
- occurs intermittently and by mutual agreement;
- occurs with children of similar age, size, or developmental level, such as siblings, cousins, or peers;
- is not associated with high levels of fear, anger, or anxiety;
- decreases when told to stop by caregivers; and
- can be controlled by increased supervision.



Help

Advice and support is available from the Sexual Abuse Centre
help@sexualabuse.org.nz – 07 348 1555

Problematic sexual behaviours

Finally, here are examples of some problematic sexual behaviours to illustrate the range of issues that may be seen. A behaviour is considered to be problematic if it:

- is a frequent, repeated behaviour, such as compulsive masturbation

Example: A six-year-old repeatedly masturbates at school, in other public places or at home.

- occurs between children who do not know each other well

Example: An eight-year-old girl shows her private parts to a new child during an after school programme.

- occurs with high frequency and interferes with normal childhood activities

Example: A seven-year-old girl has been removed from the soccer team because she continues to touch other children's private parts.

- is between children of different ages, size, and developmental levels

Example: An eleven-year-old boy is "playing doctor" with a three-year-old girl.

- is aggressive, forced, or coerced

Example: A ten-year-old threatens his six-year-old cousin and makes him touch his penis.

- does not decrease after the child is told to stop a behaviour

Example: A nine-year-old child continues to engage other children in mutual touching after being told that the behaviour is not allowed and has consequences, such as being grounded.

- causes harm to the child or others.

Example: A child causes physical injury, such as genital bruising, redness, or results in abrasions on themselves or another child.

Children with sexual behaviour problems are those who demonstrate developmentally inappropriate or aggressive sexual behaviour.

Worried about Sexual Abuse

Call us



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