

CREATING AND MAINTAINING A HEALTHY SEXUAL ENVIRONMENT AT HOME

Children and youth who demonstrate concerning or inappropriate sexual behaviour present significant challenges to parents, caregivers and guardians. Given the nature of the behaviour, it is unlikely to stop without effort and intervention. Much of that effort and intervention needs to occur at home - the place where they spend the most time, with the people that mean the most to them. In order to limit your child's exposure to potentially sexually provocative influences the Sexual Behaviour Team recommends a **Healthy Sexual Home Environment**.

The following are suggestions and recommendations for creating a **Healthy Sexual Environment at Home**.

Be aware of what your child is watching on TV! Avoid television shows, radio shows, videos, and movies that contain sexually explicit content. Many dance and music videos have a very erotic and stimulating quality that appeals to children because of the rhythm and movement. Daytime soap operas are described as energizing because of the sex and conflict. Many television shows offered at family viewing times have a lot of sexual content. If you think that a show is inappropriate for your child - turn it off and help them to find something that is more suitable for their age. Be honest and forthright about your actions. Let your child know - "That is not suitable for children. Let's find something more appropriate." They may complain, but it is very important to stick to your convictions. "Either you watch something appropriate or you find something else to do."

Shows, movies, and video games with aggression, violence, and destruction are very confusing and can produce anxiety and fear for many children. Shows with sex and aggression should not be watched. Video games with aggression and violence can also elicit the same type of reaction as a sexual and aggressive television show or movie. Don't be fooled by - "It's just a game".

Verbal and aggressive behaviour in the home can be very damaging to children. This type of behaviour is particularly worrisome when accompanied by sexual language or innuendo. Many children who witness violence in the home become very

anxious and agitated, and they themselves engage in sexual or aggressive behaviours or sexually aggressive behaviours.

Jokes about sex, the use of sexual remarks and sexual comments should not be used in front of children. Don't think - "they don't understand what it means!"

Try to be aware of and avoid having **printed material** in the home that contains sexually explicit content - such as magazines and books.

Be aware of **pet names or nick names** for family members. Some couples may use suggestive pet names that heighten the sexual tension in the home. What about your voicemail or email account name? Sexually suggestive names that identify you on the phone or the email may also identify your child in the same way.

This brings up the topic of the **Internet!!** Be very aware of what your child is doing on the computer. Keep the computer in a very open space where you can easily see what is on the screen. Warn your child about giving out identifying information. Be very careful if your child uses a chat room and warn them to only accept people into their chat room that they actually know. Webcams can be fun but need to be used at specific times with your strict supervision. "Net nannies" and other internet safety tools are helpful, but not as good as your vigilance to keep your child safe from inappropriate websites and sexual predators.

What kind of **clothing** do you allow your child to wear? Some clothing for children may look provocative and more sexual than their age. Encourage modesty so that sexual feelings are not elicited by the type of clothing your child wears. Also avoid T-shirts that are printed with sexually explicit and/or offensive language.

SUGGESTED HOUSE RULES FOR ENCOURAGING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

(These house rules can be incorporated into a family safety plan)

1. **Bedrooms:** Children with sexual behaviour problems should not sleep in the same room with another child. If this is not possible, children should sleep in their own beds. There are alarm systems and motion detectors that can help to monitor movement out of a bed. These can be very important to help to keep a younger or more vulnerable child safe. Except in the case of very young children, family members should knock before entering bedrooms. Nighttime may be an anxious transition. Leave lights on and doors open for children who are fearful.

2. **Privacy:** To help children learn the importance of boundaries, emphasize that everyone has the right to privacy. This may include a private spot or drawer that no one should go to without permission or knocking on the bathroom door or bedroom door and waiting for permission to enter. Children with sexual behaviour problems should not bathe or toilet in the presence of other children and adults.

Adults need to have privacy as well. Try to reserve intimate couple activities to a time when you are alone. Adults should not have sexual intercourse when the child is in the same room, even if the child is asleep.

3. **About the House:** It is a good idea to require all family members to wear bathrobes or sweats around your house. Walking around naked, partially clothed or in your underwear may cause embarrassment or anxiety for children. It may also arouse children who are prone to sexually acting out behavior.

4. **Horseplay:** Reduce or eliminate horseplay such as tickling or wrestling. While these behaviors are not bad in themselves, tickling can be coercive, and wrestling is often the starting point for more intimate behavior. Some children with a history of abuse may be anxious or coerced during wrestling. Other children may use the guise of wrestling as an excuse to sexually touch other children. Sexually abused or acting out children may find wrestling to be quite sexually stimulating. Instead of wrestling, channel kids into physical activities that are active but more appropriate.

5. **Sexual Talk:** Monitor sexual talk between children in the home. Talk openly about sexual matters, but make sure it is developmentally appropriate and respectful. Children who sexually abuse others often groom their victims through sexual talk, so keep tabs on talk in your house, especially when that talk is used as a put down or act of aggression. Keep to a minimum the presence of sexually

stimulating materials such as explicit television shows, magazines, music, and pornography. Be aware that violent, aggressive and stimulating television shows or video games can raise the tendency toward aggression in children, at least temporarily and it has been suggested that there is a link to sexual stimulation as well. Talk to children about what is appropriate and supervise children accordingly.

6. Physical Punishment: Parents should never use physical punishment with any child. Avoid punishment that is cruel or humiliating. This includes your response to sexually acting out behavior as well.

7. Supervision: If you have children with sexually acting out behavior, you must provide intensive supervision. An adult presence may help children keep it together. Do not leave children alone with younger or more vulnerable children. An adolescent with sexual behaviour problems should not be left in a care-giving position. Provide a higher level of supervision than you would for your child without sexually inappropriate behaviours.

8. Personal Touch: Encourage the development of healthy touch in your home such as comforting and soothing touch, and touch that takes care of someone's needs. Some examples of healthy touch are side hugs, brushing hair, pats on the back, tag, sitting beside one another to read a book, walking hand in hand, giving "high fives", touching someone's shoulder. These are less intrusive touches that most children can handle. Allow children to say "no" to touch and don't be hurt or cajole children into touches they clearly are uncomfortable with. If children need constant touch or contact with you, give them some attention using the actions suggested above, but set limits for the child. Schedule these times throughout the day so the child gets his/her need for attention met but he/she learns to respect boundaries.

If you have questions or comments please speak to any member of the Sexual Behaviour Team at CPRI or Mary Ellen Marshman, Clinic Lead, at ext. 2431.

This material has been adapted from:

"Cavanagh Johnson, T. **Helping Children with Sexual Behaviour Problems: A Guidebook for Professionals and Caregivers**. 2nd Edition. 2004."

Alaska Foster Parents Training Center. **Dealing with Sexually Acting Out Behaviors in Foster Care**, Self Study Course.