

## **Practical Responses When You Find Your Child ( Under the Age of 12) Engaged in Problematic Sexual Behaviours**

To say the least, it can be very upsetting and shocking to come upon your child acting in a sexual way. It can be even more disturbing if you discover or hear that your child has sexually harmed another child.

Responding immediately to problem sexual behaviours of children is crucial. Individual/personal values and attitudes about sexual behaviour may result in either minimizing or over-reacting to the behaviour you see or hear about. The initial response to the child is important and can significantly impact on the child's ability or willingness to address/alter the behaviours.

It is important to distinguish sexual behaviour problems from developmentally expected sexual exploration and play of children.

Children don't always understand that some behaviour can be hurtful to another child. There are a number of reasons why children act out in a sexual way. These include, but are not limited to, a history of personal victimization, witness to family dysfunction and violence, mental health issue, attachment difficulties, underdeveloped social skills, and exposure to sexualized media and a sexualized environment. If there is a significant age discrepancy between the children or you are very concerned about the behaviour you should seek out immediate consultation with a mental health professional.

When you or others observe **OR ARE TOLD ABOUT** problem sexual behaviours:

- Remain calm; don't react with shock, horror or disbelief, even though you may feel like it
- Stop/Interrupt the behaviour
- Separate the children and make sure everyone is safe
- Provide comfort as required
- Speak with each child involved separately and try to listen without blaming
- Be clear and firm that it is not okay to engage in this behaviour with anyone
- Sometimes the child will want to talk about what gave them the idea to act in a sexual way; Listen to what they have to say
- Give clear messages about boundaries and rules

What Next?

When we know that a child has a history of harmful behaviour and poses a risk to themselves or others, we need to develop safety plans to keep the behaviour from happening again and to keep everyone safe. Parents do not need to work alone at this. Seek help and supports from the child's school and community in order to prevent further problems and to protect all involved.

As adults we have responsibilities:

1. To provide children with supervision, guidance, and support to meet their needs,
2. To ensure that the family lives in a healthy and safe home environment by establishing clear rules and boundaries,
3. To teach the child the importance of safe and respectful behaviour.

For more information about developing safety plans and maintaining a healthy sexual home environment refer to other resources on the Sexual Behaviour Team website.

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