

Frequently Asked Questions

What causes sexual behavior problems?

Have all children with these problems been sexually abused?

There are many factors that influence a child's sexual behavior and sexual abuse is not the only cause. Exposure to adult sexual activity and/or sexually explicit materials such as the internet or pornography, physical abuse and emotional neglect, and witnessing domestic violence all have been shown to contribute to sexual behavior problems

Do sexual behavior problems continue to adulthood?

Intervention with children with sexual behavior problems can be very effective. When the behavior is identified in childhood and intervention occurs, most problem behaviors do not continue into adulthood.

How do you know when to be concerned?

In order to understand the sexual behavior, it is important to look at the context or circumstances in which the sexual behaviors occur. Think about the size, age, developmental stages, relationship between children, and any previous history of engaging in sexual behaviors to determine the seriousness of the behaviors.

Why do children engage in sexual behaviors?

Children engage in sexual behaviors for a number of reasons. Normal sexual behavior is another way that children explore and learn about their bodies. Some children use sexual behaviors for self-soothing, calming anxiety, or possibly as a way of understanding or re-enacting previous sexual abuse.

Promoting Healthy Sexual Development

- Use correct names for all body parts
- Support child's ability to talk about body parts without shame
- Support child's ability to ask questions about sex
- Establish age-appropriate personal privacy
- Explain that their bodies belong to them and they can say "no" to confusing touch and tell about any problems

Additional Resources

Resources and books by expert on child sexual behavior Toni Cavanagh Johnson
www.tcavjohn.com

KidsHealth is an organization where parents children and teens can learn about sexual development and other health topics.
www.kidshealth.org

American Academy of Pediatrics is where you can learn more about child sexual development.
www.aap.org

Contact Us

Northwestern District Attorney's Office
Child Abuse Unit
1 Gleason Plaza
Northampton, MA 01060
(413) 584-6138



Understanding Children's Sexual Behavior

About Child Sexual Behavior

What is “child sexual behavior”?

Child sexual behavior includes a range of behaviors including: touching one’s own genitals, showing private body parts to others, touching others’ private parts, mutual touching between children, and talking about sexual acts.

Curiosity and exploration about sexuality are a normal part of every child’s development.

The challenge? Knowing when a child’s sexual behaviors are reason for concern.

Natural and Healthy Behaviors*

- Touching one’s own genitals and masturbation are common at all ages. As they get older, children learn to be more private.
- Behaviors that are about information gathering, like “playing house” or “playing doctor.” Children explore others’ bodies by looking.
- Children involved in sexual behavior that is normal and healthy are of similar age, size, and developmental status and participation is voluntary.
- The child’s interest in sexual behavior is balanced by having curiosity about other things as well.

Keep in mind: Setting limits on some healthy sexual behaviors is a normal part of childrearing.

Problematic Sexual Behaviors*

- The children involved in the sexual play do not have an ongoing relationship and friendship.
- The age, size, or developmental status of the children involved is significantly different.
- The sexual behaviors of the child are out of balance with the rest of the child’s life. The child prefers to engage in sexual behaviors instead of other age-appropriate activities. The behavior might become more frequent, repetitive, or compulsive.
- Sexual behaviors continue despite clear and consistent messages from adults to stop.
- Child’s sexual behaviors cause complaints from other children or adults.
- Child’s sexual behaviors demonstrate knowledge of adult sexual behavior beyond his/her age and developmental level.
- A child uses trickery or force to engage others in sexual behaviors.
- A child’s sexual behavior is directed towards adults.

*adapted from T.C. Johnson, Understanding Children’s Sexual Behavior (2007)

How to Respond to a Child’s Problematic Sexual Behavior

- Remain calm. Be curious about how your child learned the behavior.
- Think about why your child might be engaging in the behavior.
- Do not shame or embarrass your child. Talk about what sexual behaviors are acceptable or unacceptable.
- Do not use the language that labels a child or young person a “pervert” or “sex offender.”
- Interrupt the behavior and redirect your child to more appropriate activities.
- Supervise! If you are unsure if your child is exhibiting sexual behaviors or if the behaviors are concerning, always supervise your child with other children.

If you are concerned, seek professional consultation.

For referral help, contact your pediatrician, mental health clinic, or your local Children’s Advocacy Center.

Children’s Advocacy Center of Hampshire County
593 Elm Street
Northampton, MA 01060
(413) 570-5986
cachampshire.org

Children’s Advocacy Center of Franklin County
and North Quabbin Area
56 Wisdom Way
Greenfield, MA 01301
(413) 475-3401
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