



Recognizing Healthy & Unhealthy Sexual Development in Children

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In an age when childhood sexual abuse and victimization is increasingly on our minds, it is important for parents and other caretakers to understand what is “normal” sexual development and behavior in children and teenagers, and which behaviors might signal that a child is a victim of sexual abuse, or acting in a sexually aggressive manner towards others.

Sexual development and sexual play are natural and healthy processes in children, from toddlers through childhood and into adolescence. For infants and toddlers, this usually involves body sensations, cuddling and touch, and playing with toys. It can be hard to tell the difference between “normal” sexual behaviors and behaviors that are signs a child may be developing a problem.

Infant to School-Age

Preschool age (0 to 5 years) children will have questions and express knowledge relating to differences in gender and private body parts, hygiene, toileting, pregnancy and birth. Uncommon behaviors may include knowledge of specific sexual acts, explicit language or participation in adult-like sexual contact with other children. When children reach school-age (6-8 years) they may have questions about sexual behavior, relationships, menstruation and pregnancy. They begin to foster personal values surrounding their physical development and may begin experimenting with same-age and same gender children, often during games or role-playing. Self stimulation in private is expected to continue and is normal sexual development in children.

Adolescence

By ages 9 to 12 hormonal changes and external influences will increase their sexual awareness, feeling and interest at the onset of puberty. They will begin to have questions about sexual materials and information and display a healthy curiosity about relationships and sexual behavior. Teenagers start discussing sexual terms, acts and personal values; particularly among their peers. Increased experimentation and romantic relationships can develop during the early teen years. Abnormal behavior during this stage of development includes, adult-like sexual acts or displays of sexuality in public places and should be cause for concern. As adolescents reach puberty they begin questioning social relationships, sexual customs and may even acknowledge there are consequences for sexual behavior. Sexual experimentation between adolescents of the same age and gender is common. Troubling behavior could involve displays of sexual behavior in public places and/or sexual interests directed towards much younger children.

But it is important to distinguish between age-appropriate and age inappropriate sexual behaviors. Many children en-gage in sexual behaviors and show sexual interests throughout their entire childhood, even though they have not yet reached puberty. However, normative (or expected) sexual behaviors are usually

not overtly 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.

Appropriate and Inappropriate Childhood Sexuality

Like other areas of growth, children's sexual behavior develops over time, and many behaviors are normal for children at certain ages. On the other hand, there are sexual behaviors about which we should be concerned, are worrisome, and should not be ignored or seen as child's play. Other sexual behaviors are more serious and may be dangerous to the child and others. Nevertheless, when a child engages in sexual behaviors, it can be difficult to decide when the behavior is natural and healthy, and when it may reflect a problem or disturbance. The normative behaviors of childhood and adolescence are of concern when they are extensive or suggest preoccupation, or involve others in ways that are not consensual. Sexual behaviors in children present a special concern when they appear as prominent features in a child's life, or when sexual play or behaviors are not welcomed by other children involved in the play. This is the point at which sexually harmful and aggressive behaviors most closely and clearly hinges.

Sexually Reactive Children

"Sexually Reactive" children are pre-pubescent boys and girls who have been exposed to or had contact with inappropriate sexual activities. The sexually reactive child may engage in a variety of age-inappropriate sexual behaviors as a result of his or her own exposure to sexual experiences, and may begin to act out, or engage in, sexual behaviors or relationships that include excessive sexual play, inappropriate sexual comments or gestures, mutual sexual activity with other children, or sexual molestation and abuse of other children.

Inappropriate Sexual Exposure

For children aged below 11, we consider all forms of sexual exposure inappropriate, and especially for children aged 10 and younger. This includes:

- All forms of sexual activity with adolescents and adults
- Viewing sexually explicit material
- Witnessing sexual behaviors 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 explicit sexual materials outside of an educational experience taught by qualified staff

Inappropriate Sexual Behaviors

Sexually reactive children may react to their exposure to sexual activities by:

- Demonstrating precocious sexualized activities, gestures, language, and knowledge
- Engaging in extensive mutual sexual play with same age or younger children
- Preoccupation with sexual activities and ideas
- Engaging in sexual behaviors in public
- 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
- Sexually molesting others, and especially younger children

Signs of Sexual Disturbance

Toni Cavanagh Johnson, a psychologist specializing in childhood sexual development, lists signs of concern in children up to the age of about 12:

- Children should not be preoccupied with sexual play and should engage in many other forms of play
- Children should not engage in sexual play with much younger or much older children
- Children should not have precocious knowledge of sex beyond their age
- Children's sexual behaviors and interests should be similar to those of other same-age children
- Children should not be "driven" to engage in sexual activities, and be able to stop when told to by an adult
- Children's sexual play should not lead to complaints from or have a negative effect on other children, and should not cause physical or emotional discomfort to themselves or others
- Children should not sexualize relationships, or see others as objects for sexual interactions
- Children age 4 and older should understand the rights and boundaries of other children in sexual play
- Children should not experience fear, shame, or guilt in their sexual play
- Children should not engage in adult-type sexual activities with other children
- Children should not direct sexual behaviors toward older adolescents or adults
- Children should not engage in sexual activities with animals
- Children should not use sex to hurt others
- Children should not use bribery, threats, or force to engage other children in sexual play

There are many excellent books and other publications that explain and discuss healthy sexual development in children and adolescents. Parents who have questions about sexual behavior in children should take the time to learn about sexual development in their child, and be aware of the possibility of sexual difficulties.