

Child Sexual Behaviors: What Is Considered "Normal" Sexual Development and Behavior?

By: Phil Rich, Ed.D., LICSW

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.

In fact, 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.

Even in the earliest of days, 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 behaviors and questions 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 clearer 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 clearly developing, and puberty brings the onset of menstruation in girls and more routine masturbation for both boys and girls, and especially boys. As children move deeper 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.

But it is important to distinguish between age appropriate and age inappropriate sexual behaviors. Many children engage 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.

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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. That is, 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 pornography or other 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
- engaging in excessive masturbation or demonstrating a preoccupation with sexual activities and ideas
- engaging in sexual behaviors in public, such as sexual exposure, rubbing, or masturbation
- interest in or attempting sexual contact with older children, adolescents, adults, or animals

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- engaging in or attempting significant sexual encounters with same age or younger children, including masturbation, oral sex, digital penetration, and intercourse
- sexually molesting other, 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 aged 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.

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Phil Rich, Ed.D., LICSW, is the author of Understanding, Assessing, and Rehabilitating Juvenile Sexual Offenders, the eight books in The Healing Journey series of self-help journaling books, and two books in the Therapy Homework Planner, series, all of which are published by John Wiley & Sons. He is the Clinical Director of the Stetson School, a long-term residential treatment program for sexually reactive children and juvenile sexual offenders.

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