



Information sheet 10

Children's Sexual Behaviour can be a Child Protection issue

Learning about their sexuality is just as important to children as any other learning and usually commences in very early childhood when children discover that touching their own genitals can produce a range of pleasurable or comforting feelings.

It is normal for children to engage in sexual exploration/play with themselves and/or their peers up until puberty. Specific behaviours during normal childhood sexual development can include masturbation, sex jokes, sexual exploration with similar age children of the other or same sex, and role-playing adult relationships.

A definition of age-appropriate sexual behaviour in children

There is no single standard for determining normal, developmentally appropriate sexual behaviours in all children. The child's cultural background, parental and societal attitudes and beliefs, living conditions, exposure to non-abusive sexual material and nudity, the presence or absence of brothers or sisters, are some of the factors that can influence the type and range of sexual behaviours that a child may engage in.

There is no need for parents to worry about sex play if;

- the children are about the same developmental age and size
- any sex play forms a minor part of their overall play patterns
- they are not being made to do something they don't want to do
- they are not doing things that children of that age don't usually know about.

It is normal for children to be embarrassed, but not angry or defensive, if an adult sees them and interrupts their sexual play. It is also normal for children whose sex play is interrupted by an adult to cease this play and switch to more socially acceptable play with no discomfort or distress.

Having a baseline knowledge of age-appropriate sexual behaviour is the most useful guide in determining whether or not any specific behaviour and/or the manner in which it is acted out needs to be understood as problematic. For further information regarding normal sexual behaviours in child development phases, visit:

[Guidelines for responding to student sexualised behaviour](#) or [Understanding the sexual behaviour of children](#)

A definition of problem sexual behaviour in children

As a general rule, any sexual behaviour which is outside the normal developmental sexual activity for that age and which consistently exceeds the sole or mutual exploratory behaviour normally seen in young children should be investigated further. Examples can include:

- knowing more about sex than expected for the child's age, eg preschool children acting out sexual intercourse
- forcing, manipulating or coercing others to play sex games
- playing sex games with much younger children, or with children of a much lower developmental age

- trying to involve adults in sexual play, conversations or activities
- talking about and playing about sex for a lot of the time, rather than a normally infrequent activity
- masturbating so much that it interferes with their play, or masturbating in public after kindergarten age
- consistently drawing the sexual parts of bodies
- being afraid or upset when people talk about their bodies or sex
- inserting foreign objects into their own or other children's vagina or anus, or requesting that other children or adults do that to their bodies.

If any such behaviour is engaged in particularly if; it is with other children outside that child's peer age group, it is hard to interrupt, the child appears driven to go back to the behaviour despite attempts to divert, and the behaviour is accompanied by coercion, aggression or the clear quest for sexual release, then consideration needs to be given to the possibility of a child protection concern. For further information: [Understanding the sexual behaviour of children – part 2](#).

Children's problematic sexual behaviours must not be ignored.

- Australian research ¹ cites international studies that identified sexual abuse by children or young people ranges from between 40 and 90 per cent of all sexual offending against children.
- Inappropriate sexual behaviours can be traumatic for both the children perpetrating such behaviours and the children coerced into participating in, or being the recipient of, such behaviours. Depending on the type of sexual behaviour and how it is perpetrated the impact for the child on the receiving end can be just as harmful as sexual abuse experienced from an adult.
- A range of studies suggest that the sexual behaviours of children that fall outside the accepted norm within any particular child's cultural, societal and developmentally appropriate standards may be an indication that a child is being, or has been, sexually abused. Increasing evidence also points to the fact that it is important to evaluate young children who are coercing other children into unwanted sexual activity in order that such coercive behaviour does not continue into their adolescent and adult life. These children are also likely to be experiencing a range of other problems such as lack of empathy, inadequate social skills, problematic affect, difficulty with peer relationships and depression ².
- Apart from the need to interrupt inappropriate sexual behaviours to prevent their continuation and escalation, there is a duty to ensure that whatever is behind the problem behaviours is addressed.

Some facts on the prior experiences of children with problematic sexual behaviours

Research ³ indicates that children with problematic sexual behaviours are statistically significantly more likely than children with normal sexual behaviours to:

- have sexually abusive caregivers
- have been sexually abused themselves
- have experienced other forms of abuse and neglect.

Whenever a health professional has clear concerns of physical, emotional, sexual abuse and/or neglect happening to the child they are seeing, or any other child in the family, they have a responsibility to take action to ensure that protective measures are put in place.

Refer to *Guidelines for Protecting Children 2015* for further information and guidance.

¹ Australia's Response to Sexualised or Sexually Abusive Behaviours in Children & Young People. (2010) W. O'Brien. Australian Crime Commission.

² Evaluation of Transformers Program for children who engage in problem sexual behaviour. Australian Childhood Foundation 2005

³ Summary of literature review. Australian Childhood Foundation 2010