



Complex Conversations – Sexual Behaviours in Children

Overview of Training

What does normal sexual behaviour look like in children?

Problem Sexual Behaviour – When should we be Concerned?

Reasons behind Sexual Behaviour

Responding to Sexual Behaviours

- **Education**
- **Boundaries**
- **Positive Touch**

Sexual Behaviour in Children

Group Discussion



What are some of the sexual behaviours that children display, that we might see as normal?

What are some of the sexual behaviours children display that is more cause for concern?

What is Normal Sexual Behaviour?

Up to age 6

- Show private parts to peers in reciprocal fashion (you show me yours; I'll show you mine)
- Plays doctor (primary age)
- Compares genitals with friends
- Show interest in viewing others' bodies, e.g. peeking at others in the bathroom
- May look at nude pictures
- May use 'dirty' words for bathroom functions
- Likes to hear/tell dirty jokes or songs
- Touches own genitals
- Masturbates occasionally in private
- Occasionally imitates flirtatious behaviour of adults associated with sexual intercourse e.g. pelvic movements



Reasons for Normal Sexual Behaviour

- Children discover at an early age that the genital areas are pleasant to touch.
- Children also engage in sexual behaviour because they are curious e.g. what do other children's bodies look like? How are boys and girls different from each other?
- Children under 5 may undress, or touch others, without much forethought or embarrassment
- Normally this behaviour (but not the curiosity) changes significantly by grade 1 and 2, the children learn what is socially acceptable and gain increased self-control (development of pre-frontal cortex)
- Sexual exploration is also an information gathering process about gender roles and behaviours (e.g. playing house)



Responding to Normal Sexual Behaviour

- **Just because the behaviour is typical, doesn't mean the behaviour should be ignored.**
- **Often, when children participate in sexual behaviour it indicates they need to learn something.**
- **Teach what the child needs to know, given the situation.**
- **Normal sexual Behaviour diminishes or disappears when adults state what is appropriate and redirect them to other activities.**



Problem Sexual Behaviour

Behaviours that are cause for concern

- Attempts to expose the genitals of peers
- Plays sexual 'games,' despite being told not to
- Continuing to peek at others in the washroom, or exposing themselves despite being told not to
- Shows persistent fascination with pornography
- Has sexually explicit conversations with peers that reflect adult level of knowledge
- Writes or draws sexual graffiti
- Teases or embarrasses peers with sexual comments
- Interprets sexual meaning to neutral events, pictures, etc
- Is preoccupied with masturbation
- Touches, rubs genitals in public despite being told not to
- Engages in sexual behaviour directed at adults
- Touches or stares at the breasts or buttocks of adults
- Simulates intercourse with clothing on, with dolls, peers, animals
- Is preoccupied with sexual themes (especially sexually aggressive ones)

Problem Sexual Behaviour

Behaviours that are cause for SERIOUS concern

- **Induces fear/makes threats of force to get others to expose themselves.**
- **Repeatedly exposes themselves in public despite correction**
- **Exposes self forcibly to others**
- **Touches genitals of others with force**
- **Forces others to play sex-related games**
- **Engages in chronic peeking, exposing, obscenities or pornographic interest**
- **Sexually explicit conversations with children of significantly lower power or age**
- **Forces/manipulates others to view nude pictures or pornography**
- **Has sexually explicit conversations with peers that reflect adult level of knowledge**

Problem Sexual Behaviour

Behaviours that are cause for **SERIOUS** concern

- Degrades self or others with sexual language or gestures
- Makes sexually explicit proposals/threats
- Engages in compulsive masturbation with interferes with normal functioning
- Engages in masturbation which includes penetration
- Rubs up against others (peers or adults) in a secret or apparently accidental way
- Demonstrates repetitive simulation of intercourse with dolls, peers, animals with clothing on
- Simulating intercourse with clothes off
- Engages in oral, vaginal or anal penetration of other children or animals
- Exposes other's genital using physical force
- Inflicts genital or anal injury or causes bleeding

Types of Problem Sexual Behaviour

Reactive Sexual Behaviour

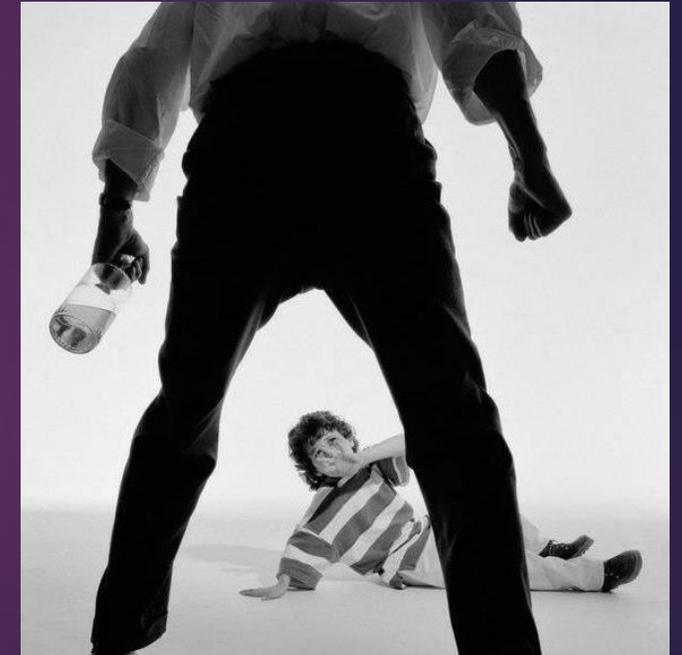
Reinforced Sexual Behaviour

Coercive Sexual Behaviour

REACTIVE Sexual Behaviour

Reactive Sexual Behaviour is often a re-enactment of a child's experience

- Occurs when a child is overwhelmed by an experience, and is unconsciously attempting to make sense of the experience
- Some sexually abused children, especially if undisclosed, will engage other children in behaviour parallel to their trauma
- Reactive sexual behaviour is spontaneous, impulsive, and occurs without planning
- The child who has engaged in this behaviour simply finds himself or herself in a circumstance that seems to trigger the memory of an earlier similar experience.



REINFORCED Sexual Behaviour

Children who feel profoundly sad, lonely, or empty, can use sexual behaviour to cope with unpleasant emotions

- They may have experienced severe physical and emotional neglect
- They may have been sexually abused, exposed to adult sexual activity, or lived in a sexualised environment
- They learn that sexual feelings can compensate for, or cover up, unpleasant feelings of sadness or worry
- They may gravitate towards children with similar problems, and engage in mutual sexual behaviour
- Children who engage in this kind of behaviour find it reinforcing



Impact of Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse can involve being sustained in a state of threat for long periods of time – forcing the brain to adapt and often creating associations between sexual and defensive systems.

“Each component of the ordinary response to danger, having lost its utility, tends to persist in an altered or exaggerated state” (Herman, 1992)

Exploitation within a care-giving relationship can also create maladaptive associations between our libido and care-giving system.

Responding to Sexualised Behaviours



Approaching Discussions

PACE

Playfulness

Acceptance

Curiosity

Empathy

- We can relate in a playful manner, even when we are exploring topics associated with shame
- Facilitate an open, reflective attitude through an accepting and curious stance
- Use curiosity and interest to maintain engagement
- Reflect back feelings and emotions – aim to replicate process of attunement
- The child can accept more stress and conflict when it is experienced with empathy

Setting Rules Around Sexual Behaviours

- **Be prepared to have an awkward conversation – be explicit about your concerns**
- **Be clear about the rules – Write them down if necessary**
 - Masturbation (Discuss privacy and safety)
- Teach the child appropriate touching and discuss what kinds of touching everyone is comfortable with
- **Be clear about what is sexual and non-sexual**
- May decide that everyone will ask each other for permission before engaging in physical affection
- Asking permission can promote empathy and accountability

Responding to Sexual Behaviours

1) Encourage communication and provide appropriate boundaries:

Adults provide a model for the child by being able to talk clearly and calmly about the sexual behaviour and explaining what is not appropriate.

2) Support attunement and integration of needs:

Help the child to recognise and interpret cues that signal others' feelings and needs, and tell the child about the impact of her or his behaviour on others. **Link it back to their own needs** E.g. maintaining friendships without increasing shame.

3) Promote accountability:

Adults help the child develop the ability to 'catch' his or her thoughts, recognise triggers and thinking errors, and understand that behaviour does not "just happen"



Responding to Sexual Behaviours



1) Identifying and labelling emotional triggers:

Pay attention to patterns of behaviour and antecedents, and support the child to talk about how they are feeling at the time

- Are they sad or feeling lonely?
- Are they worried or feeling unsafe?
- Are they angry?
- Are they bored?

2) Soothe, redirect and encourage alternative interests:

Provide the child with soothing and redirection.

Support the child to engage in other interests and activities that might provide the child with comfort, connection, soothing, pleasure or distraction.

Setting Rules Around Sexual Behaviours

Discuss rules pertaining to:

- Clothing
 - Touching
 - Privacy
 - Bathrooms
 - Bedrooms
 - Language
 - Secrets
 - Supervision and Safety
- Discuss the rule, related behaviours, consequences (if the child understands them) and the reasons why.
 - Provide clear, age appropriate information on sexuality; correct words for body parts and sexual behaviours, boundary issues, including with whom and when it is appropriate to share certain behaviours and information.

Sex Education

Table 2: What to Teach When⁸

Preschool children (less than 4 years)

Basic Information

- Boys and girls are different
- Accurate names for body parts of boys and girls
- Babies come from mommies
- Rules about personal boundaries (for example, keeping private parts covered, not touching other children's private parts)
- Give simple answers to all questions about the body and bodily functions.



Safety Information

- The difference between “okay” touches (which are comforting, pleasant, and welcome) and “not okay” touches (which are intrusive, uncomfortable, unwanted, or painful)
- Your body belongs to you
- Everyone has the right to say “no” to being touched, even by grownups
- No one—child or adult—has the right to touch your private parts
- It’s okay to say “no” when grownups ask you to do things that are wrong, such as touching private parts or keeping secrets from mommy or daddy
- There is a difference between a “surprise”—which is something that will be revealed sometime soon, like a present—and a “secret,” which is something you’re never supposed to tell. Stress that it is never okay to keep secrets from mommy and daddy
- Who to tell if people do “not okay” things to you, or ask you to do “not okay” things to them

Sex Education

Young Children (approximately 4-6 years)

Basic Information

- Boys' and girls' bodies change when they get older.
- Simple explanations of how babies grow in their mothers' wombs and about the birth process.
- Rules about personal boundaries (such as, keeping private parts covered, not touching other children's private parts)
- Simple answers to all questions about the body and bodily functions
- Touching your own private parts can feel nice, but is something done in private

Safety Information

- Sexual abuse is when someone touches your private parts or asks you to touch their private parts
- It is sexual abuse even if it is by someone you know
- Sexual abuse is NEVER the child's fault
- If a stranger tries to get you to go with him or her, run and tell a parent, teacher, neighbor, police officer, or other trusted adult
- Who to tell if people do "not okay" things to you, or ask you to do "not okay" things to them

School-Aged Children (approximately 7-12 years)

Basic Information

- What to expect and how to cope with the changes of puberty (including menstruation and wet dreams)
- Basics of reproduction, pregnancy, and childbirth
- Risks of sexual activity (pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases)
- Basics of contraception
- Masturbation is common and not associated with long term problems but should be done in private

Safety Information

- Sexual abuse may or may not involve touch
- How to maintain safety and personal boundaries when chatting or meeting people online
- How to recognize and avoid risky social situations
- Dating rules