



Promoting Healthy Sexual Development

- Use correct names for all body parts.
- Support child's ability to talk about body parts without shame.
- Provide developmentally appropriate sex education.
- 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.

Resources

To learn more about children's sexual development and behavior:

- National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth at www.ncsby.org
- Resources and books by expert on child sexual behavior Toni Cavanagh Johnson at www.tcavjohn.com

We offer trainings for professionals and community organizations.

The Children's Advocacy Center of Suffolk County offers treatment services for children with problematic sexual behaviors and their caregivers.

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UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S SEXUAL BEHAVIOR



CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER
of suffolk county

Healing Starts Here

Curiosity and exploration about sexuality are a natural part of every child's development.

The challenge:

Knowing when a child's sexual behaviors are a reason for concern.

What do we mean when we say "child sexual behavior"?

Child sexual behavior includes a range of behaviors including: touching one's own genitals, showing private body parts to others, looking at and touching others' private parts, mutual touching between children, using sexual language, and looking at sexual images.

Natural and Healthy Behaviors*

Natural sexual behavior is one way that children explore and learn about their bodies.

- Children involved in sexual behavior that is natural and healthy are of similar age, size, and developmental status and participation is voluntary.
- The purpose of the activity is to gain more information – like "playing house" or "doctor". Children learn about others' bodies by looking.
- Touching one's own genitals and masturbation are common at all ages. As they get older, children learn to be more private.
- Some children use sexual behaviors to self-soothe, or calm their anxiety.

Keep in mind:

Setting limits on some healthy sexual behaviors is a normal part of childrearing.

Problematic Sexual Behaviors*

There are many factors that influence a child's sexual behavior and sexual abuse is not the only, or even the most common cause. Exposure to adult sexual activity and/or sexually explicit media, physical abuse and emotional neglect, and witnessing domestic violence have all been shown to contribute to problematic sexual behaviors.

The sexual behavior is problematic if:

- 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 create social problems with peers and/or complaints from children or adults.
- Child's sexual behaviors reflect knowledge of adult sexual behavior beyond his/her age and developmental level.
- A child uses manipulation, coercion or bribery to engage others in sexual behaviors.

When in doubt about your child's behaviors, seek the help of a professional with expertise in child sexual behaviors for guidance.

* adapted from T.C. Johnson, *Understanding Children's Sexual Behavior* (2015)

How to Respond to a Child's Problematic Sexual Behavior

It can be very difficult and stressful to learn your child is having problematic sexual behavior. Here are some helpful ideas:

- Remain calm. Be curious about how your child learned the behavior.
- Think about why your child might be engaging in the behavior.
- Be careful not to shame or embarrass your child. Talk about what sexual behaviors are acceptable or unacceptable.
- Do not use language that labels a child or young person a "pervert" or "sex offender."
- Interrupt the behavior, redirect your child to more appropriate activities and then follow up to discuss the behavior.

Supervise, supervise, 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.

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

