

## HEALTHY SEXUALITY IN CHILDREN & TEENS

Sexuality is a part of every human regardless of age. Below is just a partial list of sexual behaviors in children. Typical and common behaviors (“sex play”) should be *spontaneous, mutual and good-humored* and are considered a healthy part of psychological, social and sexual development.

Your culture, upbringing and values all impact how you think and feel about children and sexuality. You don't need to be comfortable with these things, just aware that many behaviors are considered typical and common. If you find a child or children engaged in sexual behavior, remember to calmly address the situation, remind them about the rules and re-direct their behavior.

### **TYPICAL & HEALTHY – Sex Play**

***Involves:*** Bodies, touch, games, gender identification, self-stimulation and masturbation.

- Spontaneous
- Mutual
- Good humored
- Good friends

### **SEXUALIZED BEHAVIOR**

- Adult-like
- Repeated
- Learned
- Involves others
- Sneaking or screening off
- High adult concern
- Not necessarily traumatic
- Doesn't mean sexual abuse has occurred

***Cause for concern:*** Imitating adults sexually, sex play using force, threats, dominance, violence, aggression, and/or compulsiveness.

**Our first instinct is to think that sexual abuse must have happened, but it's important to assess the entire situation before deciding that sexual abuse has occurred.**

**Often the child has been exposed to pornography or engaged in this sort of play with another child and they are acting it out.**

## **THE CHECKLIST:**

### **G.R.A.M.S**

- ✓ Good Humored?  
Good Friends?
- ✓ Repeated?
- ✓ Adult-like?  
Adult concern?
- ✓ Mutual?
- ✓ Spontaneous?  
Sneaking?

#### ***Why you need to stop sexual behavior, even if it's typical and healthy!***

*It's important to intervene and discuss safe touch, boundaries and appropriate behavior even if the behavior is typical. If the behavior is allowed to continue it can become a problem.*

*For example, if a 5-year-old boy has "penis meetings" with his same-age best friend and isn't corrected, he will be more likely to have a "penis meeting" with Uncle Creepy, because it's a fun game he plays with his friend.*

*Also, if he's not corrected, he may try to play this way with other children who find it upsetting and become more likely to be a perpetrator.*

## **AGE-SPECIFIC SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT**

*Adapted from Wurtele, S.K. and Miller-Perrin, C.L. (1992) Preventing Sexual Abuse. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.*

### **PRESCHOOL AGE (0 to 5)**

**Common:** Sexual language relating to differences in body parts, bathroom talk, pregnancy and birth. Self stimulation at home and in public. Showing and looking at private body parts.

**Uncommon:** Discussion of specific sexual acts or explicit sexual language. Adult-like sexual contact with other children.

### **SCHOOL-AGE (6 to 12) – 1st to 6th grade**

This group may include both pre-pubescent children and children who have already entered puberty, when hormonal changes are likely to trigger an increase in sexual awareness and interest.

#### **Pre-pubescent children (6 to 12) – 1st to 6th grade**

**Common:** Questions about relationships and sexual behavior, menstruation and pregnancy. Experimentation with same-age children, often during games, kissing, touching, exhibitionism and role-playing. Masturbation in private.

**Uncommon:** Adult-like sexual interactions, discussing specific sexual acts, masturbating in public.

#### **After puberty begins (9 to 12) – 4th to 6th grade**

**Common:** Increased curiosity about sexual materials and information, questions about relationships and sexual behavior, using sexual words and discussing sexual acts, particularly with peers. Increased experimenting including open-mouthed kissing, body-rubbing, fondling. Masturbating in private.

**Uncommon:** Repeated adult-like sexual behavior, including oral/genital contact and intercourse; masturbating in public.

### **ADOLESCENCE (13 to 16) – 7th to 10th grade**

**Common:** Questions about decision making, social relationships, and sexual customs; masturbation in private; experimenting between adolescents of the same age, including open-mouthed kissing, fondling and body rubbing, oral/genital contact. Voyeuristic behaviors are common in this age group. Intercourse occurs among approximately one third of children in this age group.

**Uncommon:** Masturbating in public. Sexual interest directed toward much younger children.

### **ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR: EXPLICIT + REPEATED + ADULT CONCERN = GET HELP**

***When you understand the common behaviors for each age group it makes it easier to determine if a child’s behavior is typical for their age.*** Remember to trust your gut and check in with another adult if you are unsure.

### **WHAT TO DO & SAY WHEN CHILDREN ENGAGE IN SEXUAL BEHAVIORS**

The goal is to remain in communication with the children. You *want* them to tell you what's going on so, no yelling, shaming or belittling allowed! You can have your freakout later.

Rule number one? Stay calm. Use the following script to address their behavior in the moment. Remember to be kind and firm.

### **SCRIPT FOR TALKING TO KIDS**

#### **P-DNA (adapted from ConsciousDiscipline.com)**

**Pause** & Poker Face & BREATHE!

**Describe...** “*I see...*” or “*I heard...*”

**Name...** Feeling and Rule “*I feel uncomfortable and the rule is it is not okay and not safe to play this way.*”

**Action...** “*I need you to...*” or “*Let’s go...*”

**Then...**

**Redirect** — Help kids find something else to do.

**Regroup** (G.R.A.M.S.) — What just happened?

**Plan** — Discuss with kids individually. Document. Decide: Talk to Parents? Contact authorities? Other professional consultation? Call Amy?

**Other assessment questions** – these are some other rough guidelines to consider before approaching the child/children:

- a. Is the behavior developmentally normal?
- b. Are the children the same age/size?
- c. Is the play mutual or coercive (threats, intimidation, bribery)?
- d. Is secrecy or natural privacy the quality of the play?
- e. Is the play compulsive or obsessive?

### **“3 STRIKES” RULE**

If you work with children, your authority as a teacher should stop the behavior with one or two corrections, if the behavior is “natural and healthy.” If you have a third incident, contact a professional.

No matter what, you must document all sexual behavior, even if it is considered typical and healthy. This is what can save your butt if there is an accusation of abuse in your workplace.

**As a mandated reporter, it is your legal duty to call social services, the police or the authorities if you *suspect* abuse.** I believe every adult should behave as though they are a mandated reporter.

### **WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?**

**Sexual activity with a child by an adult, adolescent or older child for their own sexual pleasure.** Older child refers to: size, age (3+ yrs), developmental age difference, status (babysitter), type of sexual activity (developmentally appropriate) and/or problematic dynamics.

**Besides sexual contact, it includes non-contact acts such as:**

- Exposure to private body parts.
- Exposure to pornography.
- Voyeurism (spying or “Peeping Tom” behaviors).
- Communicating in a sexual manner by phone or internet including text, instant or personal messaging, on social media or email.

**It can be an agonizing and traumatic experience for its victims, but not always.** Sexual abuse can feel good to the victim and can be very confusing because of this.

## **BEHAVIORAL WARNING SIGNS A CHILD MAY HAVE BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED**

Generally speaking, pay attention to any change in behavior in a child. Physical signs are rarer and hard to catch. And remember, these are also the signs of trauma.

- Nightmares, trouble sleeping, fear of the dark, or other sleeping problems.
- Extreme fear of "monsters."
- Spacing out at odd times.
- Loss of appetite, or trouble eating or swallowing. Sometimes eating disorders.
- Sudden mood swings: rage, fear, anger, or withdrawal.
- Fear of certain people or places (e.g., a child may not want to be left alone with a baby-sitter, a friend, a relative, or some other child or adult; or a child who is usually talkative and cheery may become quiet and distant when around a certain person).
- Stomach illness all of the time with no identifiable reason.
- An older child behaving like a younger child, such as bed-wetting or thumb sucking.
- Sexual activities with toys or other children, such as simulating sex with dolls or asking other children/siblings to behave sexually.
- New words for private body parts.
- Refusing to talk about a "secret" they have with an adult or older child.
- Talking about a new older friend.
- Suddenly having money.
- Cutting or burning themselves as an adolescent.

## **PHYSICAL WARNING SIGNS A CHILD MAY HAVE BEEN ABUSED**

Does a child close to you have:

- Unexplained bruises, redness, or bleeding of the child's genitals, anus, or mouth?
- Pain at the genitals, anus, or mouth?
- Genital sores or milky fluids in the genital area?

If you said "yes" to any of these examples bring the child to a doctor or contact the authorities. They can help you understand what may be happening and help you develop a plan to get the child further help.

If the child needs therapy, be sure to seek out a therapist who is trained in trauma and sexual abuse specifically. At RAINN.org you can find a therapist referral through a sexual assault center in your area.

If you have any questions about these or other signs and symptoms, please call the Stop It Now! Toll-Free Helpline at 1-888-PREVENT.

## **HELPING KIDS HELP THEMSELVES**

One of the best approaches to protecting children against sexual abuse is to help them protect themselves. To do this, they need awareness, knowledge and skills:

- **Impress on children that "Your body is your own, and you have the right to say 'no' if anyone touches you in a way you don't like."**
- **Explain the difference between safe and unsafe touching.** Tell children that safe touch feels comforting, pleasant and welcome. Examples might be hugging or cuddling - as long as it is appropriate and with permission. Unsafe touch hurts physically or is uncomfortable like being pinched; having someone touch your penis/vulva when you don't want them to; a hug that is too tight - or forced upon them.
- **Allow children to decide whether they want to give or receive hugs and kisses.** Insisting that Jimmy kiss grandpa is unfair. Offer affection to youngsters rather than impose it. Substitute "Can I have (or give you) a hug?" for "Give me a hug." This helps children feel a sense of control over their body.
- **Emphasize that no adult or older child has the right to touch a child's privates or to ask a child to touch their genitals.** Explain that this includes caregivers and family members. "I need you to tell me if that ever happens. It's important that you let me know... and not be worried that I might be upset."
- **Tell children they do not have to blindly obey all adults.** "It's wrong for a grown-up to ask you to lie or steal. It is wrong for a grown-up to touch you, or ask to be touched, in the unsafe ways we talked about. You should say 'no,' then come tell me."
- **Read books about bodies and safety as part of your regular reading time.** *It's MY Body - A book about uncomfortable touch* and *I Can Play It Safe* are two of my favorites. Books make these conversations easier and not scary.
- **Make sure your environment is safe and is free of places children can hide and play inappropriate games.** This means no tents, closets, houses or other structures where kids can be sneaky and hide.
- **Have a dress code at your childcare or school.** The work of childhood is play. Children need to come to school dressed for play, not for church. This means no flip-flops, high heels, short skirts, t-shirts with mature or violent themes. Have shoes and clothing available if families "forget" the rules.
- **Use the correct names for private body parts.** Children have a right to know the correct names and using and teaching them helps to keep them safer from child sexual abuse.

## **TALKING WITH PARENTS ABOUT SEXUAL BEHAVIOR**

When working with kids we need to realize we are caring for parents' most important people in their world and parents are very protective of their children. When it comes to this topic - sexual abuse or sexual behavior - a lot is going on. It helps to put yourself in their place and get in their heads.

### **Most parents fear:**

- Their child has been hurt or abused
- Their child isn't safe
- They did something wrong
- You are judging their parenting
- Their child will be kicked out of the program
- The authorities will become involved
- Their own abuse is triggered

Everyone's fear reduces with information and education.

### **WHAT TO SAY AND DO WHEN YOU TALK TO A PARENT**

It's safer for you to talk to the parent with another person there. Try to stay as objective as possible. Report the facts about what happened.

When you let them know you need to talk say this:

"Everything is okay with your child physically and your child is safe. We had a situation and we need to talk about it."

### **Then tell them:**

- This is what happened
- This is what we did
- This is what we will be doing
- This is what we need to do in the time being to make sure that all kids are safe

### **What not to do!**

- Apologize repeatedly
- Try to explain without all the information
- Not stick to the facts
- Share names or any personal info of other kids
- Talk to parent alone

## **Script for talking to parents**

It's empowering for YOU to have a plan before you talk to the parents. Talk to a co-worker, role play if you need to and have a plan to keep yourself calm. This is not perfect but can give you a place to start the conversation (and it may sound familiar!)

### **P-NDNA for parents**

#### **Pause & BREATHE!**

- Name Feeling... ***“I feel uncomfortable talking to you about this.”***
- Describe behavior and how it was handled... ***“I noticed...”*** or ***“I heard...”*** and ***“I separated the children and reminded them it’s not okay or safe to play this way.”***
- Name Concern... ***“I am not concerned because...”*** ***“I am concerned because...”***
- Action... ***“Our plan is...”***

#### **Questions parents may have and you should be ready to answer:**

- Is my kid is safe?
- What are you going to do to fix it?
- Who was watching my child?
- Where were the adults?
- Where were they when this happened?
- Why were you not able to stop this?

#### **To prepare for the conversation ask yourself:**

- Do I have all of the information?
- What can I do to prevent anything else from happening?
- What can I do keep the parent calm?
- How did I handle the situation with the child(ren)?
- What am I doing to ensure all kids are safe?

## **Calming an upset parent**

Understandably, a parent may freak out when they have this conversation with you. Here are some things you can do to help them stay calm:

- Acknowledge the parent’s feelings
- Keep calm yourself
- Stop the meeting and meet at another time when they are calmer
- It is not ok for a parent to abuse you - ask them to leave and reschedule
- If the parent is threatening or abusive, kindly ask them to leave and resume the conversation at a later time
- CALL SOCIAL SERVICES IF PARENT IS THREATENING OR ABUSIVE — RED FLAG!

***The #1 thing you can do is connect with each and every parent and show them they are important to you.***

## **REFERENCES & RESOURCES**

Stop It Now! (2011). *Warning Signs of Possible Child Sexual Abuse in a Child's Behavior*. Retrieved from [http://www.stopitnow.org/warning\\_signs\\_child\\_behavior](http://www.stopitnow.org/warning_signs_child_behavior). Find this and more helpful info and handouts on their site.

Larsson, I. (2000). *Sexual Abuse of Children: Child Sexuality and Sexual Behavior*. Retrieved from <http://www.jeanyveshayez.net/tele-pdf/larsson.pdf>. Excellent and concise information about these issues.

Johnson, T. C. (2014). *Understanding Children's Sexual Behaviors: What's Natural and Healthy*. South Pasadena, CA: Toni Cavanagh Johnson. <http://www.tcavjohn.com/>. You can order this booklet online - I highly recommend it!

Wurtele, S.K. and Miller-Perrin, C.L. (1992) *Preventing Sexual Abuse*. Great resource!

de Becker, G. (200) *Protecting the Gift: Keeping Children and Teenagers Safe (and Parents Sane)*. One of the best books ever written about personal safety.

HCSATS, (2015) *A Safer Family. A Safer World*. <https://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/csabooklet.html>. A wonderful booklet for parents about keeping kids safer from sexual abuse. You can get 50 free copies for your organization.

[StopItNow.org](http://StopItNow.org) – Sexual abuse prevention information.

[RAINN.org](http://RAINN.org) – For therapist referrals in your area.

[BirdsAndBeesAndKids.com](http://BirdsAndBeesAndKids.com) – For more information about professional training and parenting classes.

### **NEED TO REACH ME?**

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## IS IT COMMON OR CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

1. When 5 year-old Jimmy comes over to play with 5-year-old Billy, he takes Billy's 3 year-old sister into a room, closes the door and pulls her pants down. He does this every time he comes over to play. COMMON? \_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_
2. A brother age 3 and sister age 5, love to take baths together. Tonight, while they are splashing around and playing with toys the sister playfully touches her brother's penis. COMMON? \_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_
3. A boy age 10 has his hand down his pants every day during silent reading time. COMMON? \_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_
4. Two little girls age 4, love to play midwife and take turns birthing babies by putting them under their dresses, lying down pretending to push them out of their vaginas. They use the word vagina and seem to know a lot about pregnancy and birth. COMMON? \_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_
5. A girl age 4 touches her vulva every chance she gets, including rubbing against other people. COMMON? \_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_
6. A girl age 3 playing with a boy baby doll, takes off its clothes, and kisses its forehead, mouth, stomach and penis. She is careful and serious about this. COMMON? \_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_
7. Two boys ages 7 and 8, are playing in a tent in the back yard. They decide to get ready for "bed" and take off their clothes. This leads to checking out each other's privates. COMMON? \_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_
8. A pair of 12 year-olds are dating and they have tried oral sex one time. COMMON? \_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_
9. A 15 year-old boy has strong romantic feelings for a very mature 11 year-old girl at his church. He loves to talk and flirt with her. COMMON? \_\_\_ CONCERNING? \_\_\_