

Inappropriate sexual behaviour

How to respond helpfully and safely to a child/young person who is exhibiting inappropriate sexual behaviour

Disclaimer: The information and advice in this section should only be used in conjunction with the Child Protection guidelines and policies of your own organisation which you must implement in all circumstances.

Things to think about

- Remember that children of all ages become involved in sexual behaviours and that the vast majority of children's sexual behaviour is seen as healthy and normal.
- Remember that it is not only adults who can abuse and hurt children. It is therefore very important not to ignore inappropriate sexual behaviour as children sometimes need to be protected from each other.
- To help you make the distinction between normal and inappropriate, read the section about sexual behaviour.
- If you are still unsure, speak to a senior colleague or a senior health service professional such as the child's GP or Health Visitor.
- Remember that younger children who have been abused will sometimes be acting out what has been done to them.
- Remember that sexually inappropriate and sexually abusive teenagers have often been abused themselves.

Think about yourself

It is important to tune into exactly what you are being told. A disclosure or hint of disclosure can evoke all sorts of emotions in you the helper, especially if you, or someone close to you has experienced abuse in the past. Because of this it is easy to imagine that the child/young person has said more than they have.

If you find yourself having to respond to sexually inappropriate behaviour you might also find that the intensity of your own emotions are difficult to cope with. It is important that you try and stay calm so that you can keep a clear head and make the right decisions about how to protect children/young people who you have discovered may be at risk. You should also try to be non-judgemental as the children/young people who are being sexually inappropriate towards others may themselves have been abused by others.

Finally remember that you have to look after yourself. It is normal for a worker to feel the need to talk to an experienced colleague or child mental health professional to help them to make sense of their emotional response after dealing with the issues being discussed in this section. You may also need some time to rediscover your emotional strength in much the same way as someone suffering from shock after a car accident. This is quite normal and does not in any way reflect on your competence as a worker.

What you can do

- Make sure that you are aware of and follow the child protection policies of the organisation you work for.
- Tell the child/young person to stop the behaviour and that it is unacceptable. Be clear and direct in your communication. Use language that is appropriate to the child's age and their level of understanding.
- Remain calm. Be firm but keep control of your own emotions.
- Explain to the child why their behaviour is unacceptable.
- Give the child a chance to explain their behaviour.
- Ensure that any children who have been adversely affected are made safe, and are looked after and supported by you and colleagues from within your organisation.
- Make sure that you fully understand your obligations to report inappropriate sexual behaviour (i.e. behaviour that requires immediate further advice) and the likely immediate consequences for the child/young person of reporting. Contact the appropriate authorities in your area. This will be a child or family protection unit, or the social work department, or the police.
- Take some time to write down the facts of what you have observed as soon as you can.
- If a child/young person's behaviour is worrying but not at the extreme end of behaviours (i.e. behaviour that might give cause for concern) intervene and question the child/young person where appropriate to do so, increase your vigilance, and seek further advice. Take action to make them safer and contact a child protection or mental health specialist if you suspect they are at risk.

What not to do

- Do not panic.
- Avoid being judgemental.
- Do not put pressure on a child by persistent questioning about their behaviour when they are clearly reluctant or unable to speak about it.
- Do not convey an anxious message to a child/young person whose behaviour whose behaviour is normal and healthy. See the General Information section for details of normal, healthy behaviours of pre-pubertal children and post-pubertal young people.
- Do not confuse behaviours which might be socially unacceptable (e.g. consenting young people being sexually intimate in a youth club setting) and those which are inappropriate because of the harm which is being done to others or because of a reasonable inference that the child or young person exhibiting the behaviours is at risk.

- Do not allow any embarrassment or discomfort you might feel in dealing with sexually inappropriate behaviour prevent you from taking the right action to protect children from harm.

When to contact a mental health specialist

For further details, see the following sections of General information (sexual issues):

Examples of sexual behaviours which might give cause for concern.

Examples of sexual behaviour which should lead you to seek immediate further advice.

How to contact a mental health specialist

You should get in touch with your local health centre or hospital to obtain a contact number for the appropriate children and young people's mental health specialists.

Remember - you can contact your local mental health specialists for a number of reasons, for example:

- For advice on how to make a referral about a named child.
- For advice about whether or not to make a referral (it is normal practice to seek this advice without naming the child in the first instance).
- For advice about what to do (once again there should be no necessity to name the child).

By not naming the child you are protecting their right to confidentiality. This method of seeking advice also has the advantage that you do not need to get anyone's consent in advance of your contact phone call.