

Sexual issues

Sexual Behaviour

General information and when to take action or seek specialist help

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.

Natural and healthy sexual behaviour for children (pre-pubertal)

No action required

- Studies have shown that up to 85% of children will have engaged in some kind of sexual behaviour before the age of 13.
- The vast majority of children's sexual behaviour is normal and healthy.
- It is normal for young children to explore each other's bodies, by looking and touching. This is an important information gathering process and part of their informal education.
- Healthy play of this kind will be with children of similar age and size. Participation will be on a voluntary basis.
- A child's interest in sex and sexuality will, under normal circumstances, be balanced by curiosity about other aspects of their lives.
- A child's sexual exploration may on occasion result in embarrassment but would not usually leave children with deep feelings of anger, shame or anxiety.
- If children are discovered in sexual exploration and instructed to stop, the behaviour generally diminishes, at least in the view of adults.
- The feelings of children involved in sexual behaviour are generally light-hearted and spontaneous.
- Generally children experience pleasurable sensations from genital touching. Some children experience sexual arousal. Others may experience orgasm.
- Sexual arousal and orgasm are more frequently found in older children entering puberty.

'Normal' sexual behaviour for young people (post-pubertal)

Action required: if you are in an appropriate role to do so advise on the risk of unwanted pregnancy, of sexually transmitted diseases and other health risks. Otherwise no action is required.

- What you consider to be 'normal' will partly depend on your personal morals and your cultural/religious background.
- Whatever your moral standpoint, it is commonplace for young people (in Scotland and other western secular liberalised democracies) who have passed puberty to experiment with sex.
- Experimentation can range from mutual sexual arousal to full sexual intercourse.
- Recent figures suggest that in Scotland, 25% of 13-15 year olds have had sex.
- Behaviours which are commonplace are not necessarily behaviours which are legal, healthy or socially desirable. (The UK has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancies in the developed world.)
- A general rule of thumb is that sexual behaviour between young people is normal if there is consent and if there is not a significant age difference between partners. (Consent in Scotland can only legally be given over the age of 16 and it is illegal to have sex with someone below this age.)

Examples of sexual behaviours which might give cause for concern

Action required: Increase your vigilance. Ask questions of the child/young person about their behaviour and why they are doing it. This kind of behaviour can indicate that a child or young person has been sexually abused. Take action to make them safer and contact a child protection or mental health specialist if you suspect they are at risk.

Children

- An obvious demonstration of fear or anxiety when sexual topics are being discussed.
- Playing with faeces. Persistent deliberate urinating outside the toilet bowl.
- Persistent touching or rubbing of genitals after being told "no" by an adult.
- Imitating sexual behaviour with a doll.
- Becoming very upset when observed changing clothes.
- A continuous fascination with nude pictures.
- Wanting to play games with much older/younger children which are about sex or sexuality.
- Drawing genitals on clothed people and/or genitals which are disproportionate to body size.
- Wanting to compare genitals with much older/younger children.
- Continually wanting to touch genitals, breasts, buttocks of other children.

Young People

- Extreme promiscuity (multiple partners/sex with strangers).
- Sexual behaviour which includes an element of coercion or lack of consent.
- Sexual relationships with much older or much younger people.
- Consenting sexual relationships between young people and adults.
- An extreme fear of physical closeness, or of sex/sexuality.

Examples of sexual behaviour which should lead you to seek immediate further advice from your local mental health or child protection specialists

Action required: Take action to make all involved children safer and contact a child protection or mental health specialist. For further information on what to do, see sections on inappropriate sexual behaviour, hinting at sexual abuse and disclosing sexual abuse.

Inappropriate sexual behaviour

- Forcing another child to play doctor (inspecting other's bodies) and to take off their clothes.
- Forcing sex on another child.
- Forcing other children to play sexual games.
- Drawing pictures of intercourse or group sex.
- Talking in an over-sexualised way with unknown adults.
- Forcibly putting something in genitals/rectum of another child.
- Causing harm to own genitals.
- Sexual behaviour with animals.
- Repeatedly playing with or smearing faeces. Deliberately urinating on furniture.

Disclosure

- Disclosure of sexual abuse.
- Hinting at sexual abuse.

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.