

## SEXUAL PLAY AND SEXUAL EXPLORATION

Sexual exploration and sexual play are a natural part of a child's development, and may involve:

- motivated by mutual curiosity with no pressure or power play involved
- interested in similarities and differences between their bodies and others
- showing their genitals to others
- touching each other's genitals
- peeking or catching others engaged in sexual behaviours
- kissing
- playing doctor
- using "dirty" words
- telling dirty jokes

But:

- relationships are amicable outside of sexual play
- balanced with curiosity about other aspects of their world
- explore genitals just as they explore other body parts



Children learn about sex from their parents, peers and the world around them.

Today's children are increasingly exposed to sex through various media and technology, including internet and cell phones.

The child's most important source of information about sex should be from their parents.

The aim of sex education is to teach facts and create appropriate attitudes towards sexuality.

Many parents still believe that they should suppress all signs of sexual activity, interest or curiosity even when these expressions are normal and healthy.

As we have become more informed and aware of sexual abuse, sexual behaviour between children sometimes causes unwarranted concern. What starts out as normal, healthy exploration or play ends up with one or both of the children being interrogated by parents, teachers, social workers or child protection services.

Whilst compulsive sexual behaviour may sometimes be caused by abuse there are many indicators to differentiate normal healthy sexual play from sexual behaviour that is a result of abuse.

There is no single indicator of sexual abuse and there is no childhood sexual behaviour that has been seen only in sexually abused children.

Sexual behaviours that may be of concern include:

- Children who do not have mutual ongoing play relationships frequently, engaging in sexual behaviours
- Children from different ages – like an 8-year-old and a 3-year-old - and developmental levels engaging in sexual behaviours
- Children who seem to have more knowledge about adult sexual expressions
- Children having far too much knowledge of sex and inappropriate touching for their developmental age.
- Children who behave in ways that are more consistent with adult sexual expressions
- Sexual behaviours that are significantly different to those of their peers
- Sexual behaviour continues despite consistent and firm requests to stop
- Children who appear unable to stop themselves from engaging in sexual behaviour or masturbation
- Sexual behaviour that elicits complaints from other children or adversely affects other children
- Children who display direct sexual behaviours at adults, showing no boundaries
- Children who engage in sexual activities without regard for the rights of others in relation to the activity
- When fear, anxiety, shame or guilt is associated with sexual behaviours



### Behaviours Related to Sex and Sexuality in Kindergarten to Fourth Grade Children

Natural and Healthy	Of Concern	Seek Professional Help
Asks about the genitals, breasts, intercourse, babies	Shows fear or anxiety about sexual topics	Endless questions about sex after curiosity satisfied. Sexual

		knowledge too great for age.
Interested in watching/peeking at people doing bathroom functions	Keeps getting caught watching/peeking at others doing bathroom functions	Refuses to leave people alone in bathroom
Uses "dirty" words for bathroom functions, genitals and sex	Uses "dirty" words with adults after parent consistently says "no", punishes child and uses healthy language themselves	Continues use of "dirty" words even after exclusion from school and activities
Plays doctor, inspecting others' bodies	Frequently plays doctor and gets caught after being told "no"	Forces another child to play doctor, to take off clothes
Boys and girls are interested in having/birthing a baby	Boy keeps making believe he is having a baby	Child displays fear or anger about babies or intercourse
Shows others his/her genitals	Wants to be nude in public after the parents says "no" and punishes child	Refuses to put on clothes. Exposes self in public after many scoldings
Interest in urination and defecation	Plays with faeces. Purposely urinates outside of toilet bowl	Repeatedly plays with or smears faeces. Purposely urinates on furniture
Touches/rubs own genitals when going to sleep, when tense, excited or afraid	Continues to touch/rub genitals in public after being told "no". rubs genitals on furniture or other objects	Touches/rubs self in public or in private to the exclusion of normal childhood activities. Rubs genitals on people
Plays house, may simulate all roles of mommy and daddy	Humping other children with clothes on. Imitates sexual behaviour with dolls/stuffed toys	Humping naked. Intercourse with another child. Forcing sex on other child/ren
Thinks other gender children are "gross" or have "cooties". Chases them	Uses "dirty" language when other children <i>really</i> complain	Uses bad language against another child's family. Hurts children of another gender
Talks about kissing or touching with friends. Talks about having a girl/boy friend	Sex talk gets child into trouble. Romanticizes all relationships	Talks about sex and sexual acts habitually. Repeatedly in trouble with regard to sexual talk
Wants privacy when in bathroom or changing clothes	Becomes upset when observed changing clothes	Aggressive or fearful in demand for privacy
Likes to hear and tell "dirty" jokes	Keeps getting caught telling "dirty" jokes. Makes sexual sounds, e.g. sighs, moans	Still tells "dirty" jokes even after exclusion from school and activities
Looks at rude pictures	Continuous fascination with nude pictures	Wants to masturbate to nude pictures or display them
Plays games with same-aged children related to sex and sexuality	Wants to play games with much younger/older children related to sex and sexuality	Child or children force others to play sexual games
Draws genitals on human figures for artistic expression or because figure is being portrayed in the nude	Draws genitals on some nude figures but not others or on drawings of clothed people. Genitals disproportionate to side of body	Genitals stand out as most prominent feature of drawing. Drawings of intercourse, group sex. Sadism, masochism shown
Explores differences between males and females	Confused about male/female differences after all questions have	Plays male or female roles in a sad, angry or aggressive manner. Hates

	been answered	own/other sex
Takes advantage of opportunity to look at nude people	Stares/sneaks to stare at nude people even after having seen many people nude	Take off their clothes. Tries to forcibly undress people
Pretends to be opposite gender	Wants to compare genitals with much older or much younger people	Demands to see the genitals, breasts, buttocks of others
Interest in touching genitals, breasts, buttocks of other same age child or have child touch his/hers	Continuously wants to touch genitals, breast, buttocks of other child/ren. Tries to engage in oral, anal, vaginal sex	Manipulates or forces other child to allow touching of genitals, breasts, buttocks. Forced mutual oral, anal or vaginal sex
Kisses familiar adults and children. Allows kisses by familiar adults and children	French kissing. Talks in sexualised manner with others. Fearful of hugs and kisses by adults. Gets upset with public displays of affection. Kisses unfamiliar adult or child	Overly familiar with strangers. Talks/acts in a sexualised manner with unknown adults. Physical contact with adult causes excessive agitation to child or adult
Looks at the genitals, buttocks, breasts of others	Touches/stares at the genitals, breasts, buttocks of others. Asks others to touch him/her on these parts	Sneakily or forcibly touches genitals, breasts, buttocks of others. Tries to manipulate others unit touching him or her
Erections	Continuous erections	Painful erections
Puts something in own genitals/rectum for the physical sensation, curiosity or exploration	Puts something in own genitals/rectum frequently or when it feels uncomfortable. Puts something in the genitals/rectum of another child	Any coercion or force putting something in genitals/rectum of other child. Causing harm to own/others genitals/rectum
Interest in breeding behaviour of animals	Touching genitals of animals	Sexual behaviours with animals

*From Johnson, C.T. (1999) Understanding your child's sexual behaviour: What's natural and healthy. New harbinger, Oakland*

## HOW YOU HANDLE IT

### Children are naturally curious creatures

Human beings are naturally curious creatures, and one of the things we're curious about from an early age is our own and other people's bodies. We're constantly comparing ourselves with others and noticing the similarities and differences.

This is what the vast majority of children are doing when they are engaging in sex play. They are trying on the different roles



they see around them. Sometimes these behaviours lead to touching each other's bodies where they may discover that it feels good. This is a natural part of development.

### **What matters is how YOU handle the situation**

It would not be a good idea to freak out and go on a tirade, banishing their friend(s) from the house forever and forbidding them from ever engaging in that type of behaviour again. Often parents

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decide to ignore the behaviour because they realise it will eventually cease, and the children will move onto other forms of play which do not involve the genitalia.

If you are just not comfortable with having this type of behaviour in your home, you can calmly ask the children to stop, get dressed, and play in a more public area of the house without closed doors. But a screaming fit could result in feelings of shame and guilt about sexual activity for your child which could last well into adulthood.

### **A perfect opportunity to talk to your children**

Regardless of what you decide to do in the moment (ignore the behaviour or stop it), this is a perfect teaching opportunity once the other child/children involved have left.

This is a prime time to sit down with your child and talk about their curiosity. Let them know that this is normal, and that you're there to answer any questions they might have.



(This certainly involves educating yourself on the topic of the "birds and the bees" and overcoming your own fear of speaking openly about it.)

### **This is also the time to talk about your values with regard to sex and relationships**

It's during this quiet talking time that it's okay for you to let your child know that you think it would be best if they played other games and kept their clothes on.

Remember, children do not naturally engage in any kind of sexual play which involves pain, simulated intercourse, penetration, or mouth-to-genitals.

They also do not interact this way with other children who are more than a few years older/younger than themselves. But catching your child playing doctor should not be a cause for alarm.

*-All 4 Women*

*Compiled by tania@WMACA*

*All the children pictured here are professional models*