



Sexual Behaviours in Children

Just as language acquisition, and motor and cognitive development are a natural part of growth and learning in children, so too is sexual development. Children go through a number of different stages of sexual development, most of which are a natural and healthy part of growing up and learning about their bodies and their world.

Sometimes children may display behaviours which appear unusual or concerning. It is important to consider these behaviours within a developmental and social context. The following provides some useful guidance, but when in doubt, talk to your health professional or contact Bravehearts' Information and Support Line on 1800 272 831.

HEALTHY SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS IN CHILDREN

Healthy sexual exploration by children is an information gathering process, where children explore the human body and gender roles. Sexual behaviours in children may be considered healthy when:

- exploration is with children of a similar age, developmental status and participation is voluntary, this can be considered natural and healthy.
- curiosity in sex and sexuality is balanced with curiosity with other aspects of their life.
- the child does not feel shame, fear, anxiety or anger during healthy sexual exploration.
- the child is able to stop the behaviour when instructed to.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS COMMON IN ALL CHILDREN

- Trying to look at people who are nude
- Touching their own private parts in private

UNCOMMON SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS IN CHILDREN

- Masturbation with an object
- Specific knowledge of sexual intercourse or attempting to have sexual intercourse
- Touching the private parts of animals
- Drawing pictures of private parts
- Asking others to perform sexual acts
- Placing objects in the anus or vagina

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS

A child's sexual behaviour may be of concern if:

- the children engaged in the behaviours don't have an ongoing friendship
- the sexual behaviour is occurring between children of differing ages – generally the wider the age gap the larger the concern
- the sexual behaviours continue in spite of clear, consistent requests to stop.

Responding to sexual behaviour problems

- Do not shame your child
- Do not call them names or make negative comments
- Be consistent in your requests
- Communicate calmly that you want them to stop what they are doing, and they are not in trouble.

Reducing sexual behaviour problems

1. Address behaviour in a short, direct, calm way (e.g., "Hands out of your pants")
2. Redirect behaviour (e.g., "Would you like to play with your doll or your blocks?")
3. Praise for good behaviour. Remember to PRAISE your child when they are NOT displaying sexualised behaviours, so they also receive attention for the preferred behaviour.

If you have any concerns and wish to talk with one of our trained staff, contact Bravehearts' Information and Support Line on 1800 272 831.