

Indian Country Child Trauma Center

Honoring Children, Respectful Ways

Fact Sheet Sexual Development and Sexual Behavior Problems in Children Ages 2-12 Part I of IV

General Information About Sexual Behavior and Sexual Knowledge of Children Ages 2-12

This provides basic information about sexual development and sexual behavior in children ages 2-12. This information is helpful for parents, elders and professionals who work with or provide services to children such as teachers, physicians, child welfare personnel, daycare providers, head start and early head start staff, and IHS and tribal mental health professionals. Understanding what is typical sexual development in children, what do children know, and what is typical sexual behavior is helpful to accurately identify sexual behavior problems in children.

Typical sexual behavior of children ages 2 to 12

- A. Basic or biological based behavior
 1. sexual responses are present from birth;¹
 2. a wide range of sexual behaviors for this age range are normal and non-problematic;^{1,2}
 3. sexual development and behavior are influenced by social, familial, and cultural factors, as well as genetics and biology.⁷
- B. Concerns about sexual behavior and what may be problematic and what is helpful.
 1. increasing numbers of school age children are being identified with inappropriate or aggressive sexual behavior;³ it is not clear if this increase reflects an increase in the actual number of cases or an increase in identification and reporting of this kind of behavior.
 2. several treatment interventions have been found to be effective in reducing problematic sexual behavior in children, such as cognitive behavioral group treatment;^{4,5} and,

Typical sexual knowledge of children age 2 to 6 years old:

- they understand that boys and girls have different private parts (or what is covered by a swim suit);
- they know the name for sexual body parts, but typically use slang words such as weenie for penis;
- have limited information about pregnancy and childbirth but understand a baby has something to do with a mommy and daddy.

Typical sexual knowledge of children ages 7 to 12 years old:

- they are aware of the correct names for the genitals but use slang terms;
- have increased knowledge about masturbation, intercourse, and pregnancy; and
- understand the physical aspects of puberty by age 10, they tend to be embarrassed easily about sex information.

To adequately address what may be problematic sexual behavior, adults who care or treat children should have knowledge of what is typical or common behavior, in children. If you know what is typical or common sexual behaviors, then you are less likely to be concerned when you see this kind of sex behavior occurring. Additional fact sheets of this series describe unusual or problematic sexual behaviors of children.

Part I – General Information about Sexual Behavior and Sexual Knowledge of Children Ages 2-12
Part II – Common vs. Infrequent Sexual Behaviors in Children
Part III – Typical Sexual Play vs. Problematic Sexual Behavior
Part IV- Children with Sexual Behavior Problems

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Common or Typical vs. Infrequent Sexual Behaviors in Children

COMMON OR TYPICAL SEXUAL BEHAVIORS EXPECTED IN CHILDREN	
CHILDREN THAT ARE AGES 2-6	CHILDREN THAT ARE AGES 7-12
Do not have a strong sense of modesty, enjoys own nudity, frequently takes off clothes	Sexual play with children they know, such as playing "doctor"
Use elimination words with peers	Looks at nude pictures, interest in
May explore body differences between girls and boys, not embarrassed	Touch own genitals at home, in private, may not want adults to know of sexual interest
Curious about sexual and genital parts, ask question, may pick up on uncomfortable reactions by adults to sexual questions	Interested in sexual content in media (TV, movies, radio)
Touch their private parts, even in public	Interested in the opposite sex
Exhibit sex play with peers and siblings; playing "doctor", "I'll show you mine if you show me yours"	Shy about undressing, discomfort with body changes
Experience pleasure from touching their genitals, may self soothe	Shy around strange or unfamiliar people

INFREQUENT SEXUAL BEHAVIORS AGES 2 - 12	
Puts mouth on sex parts of others	Asks to engage in sex acts with self, toys, & animals
Puts objects in rectum or vagina of self or others	Imitates or pretends sexual intercourse with self, dolls, stuff toys
Masturbates with objects, pillow, furniture, etc	Undresses or attempts to undress other people (younger child, sibling)
Touches others' sex parts after being told not to	Asks to watch sexually explicit television, websites, books
Touches adults' sex parts makes other uncomfortable	Makes sexual sounds

There are occurrences of infrequent and uncommon sexual behaviors in boys and girls ages 2-12.

² The listing of sexual behaviors are reported by parents of pre-school and school age children and tend to be infrequent or highly unusual. These behaviors if persistent may result in problematic behavior for these children. For example, other children may not want to play or be around them. They may harm other child. They may not be able to engage in appropriate activities because they are distracted by the sexual behavior.

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Typical Sexual Play vs. Problematic Sexual Behavior

A continuum of sexual behaviors children can engage in range from common or typical sexual play (normal child development) to problematic or inappropriate sexual behavior. Parents may have certain values about the degree to which children engage in typical or common sexual play. With supervision, children will stop behaviors if instructed to do so. Problematic sexual behavior may require more intensive intervention.

Sexual play of children that is typical sex play

- is exploratory and spontaneous; it just happened
- occurs intermittently or infrequently and by mutual agreement;
- occurs with children of similar age, size, or developmental level, such as siblings, cousins, or peers;
- is not associated with high levels of fear, anger, or anxiety on the part of the child(ren).
- decreases or stops when told by caregivers to stop; or child is directed to another activity.
- can be controlled by increased adult supervision.

Problematic sexual behavior is behavior that may cause harm, be inappropriate, or aggressive

- is a frequent, repeated behavior, such as compulsive masturbation;
Example: A six-year-old repeatedly masturbates at school or in other public places.
- occurs between children who do not know each other well or just met
Example: At school an eight-year-old girl shows her private parts to a new child.
- occurs with high frequency and interferes with normal childhood activities;
Example: A seven-year-old girl has been removed from the soccer team because she continues to touch other children's private parts.
- is between children of different ages, size, and development level;
Example: An eleven-year-old boy is "playing doctor" with a three-year-old girl.
- is aggressive, forced, or coerced;
Example: A ten-year-old threatens his six-year-old cousin forcing him to touch his penis.
- does not decrease after the child is told to stop the behavior and consequences imposed
Example: A nine-year-old child continues to engage other children in mutual touching after being told the behavior is not allowed and having consequences, such as being grounded or taking away a privilege.
- causes harm to self or others.
Example: A child causes physical injury, such as bruising, redness, or abrasions on themselves or another child, or causes another child to be highly upset or fearful.⁹

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Children with Sexual Behavior Problems

Children with sexual behavior problems (SBPs) are children 12 years and under who engage in developmentally inappropriate or aggressive sexual behavior. This definition includes self-involved sexual behavior, such as frequent public masturbation, and intrusive, coercive, forceful or aggressive sexual behavior towards others. Although the term “sexual” is used, the children’s intentions and motivations for these behaviors may be unrelated to sexual gratification rather they focus on body parts independent of sexual motivation.

It should be noted that the majority of children who have been sexually abused **do not** have subsequent inappropriate or aggressive sexual behaviors. However, some children who have been sexually abused have inappropriate sexual behaviors and others have aggressive or highly problematic sexual behavior.⁸

Although only a small number of children develop problematic sexual behavior, professionals and parents may have concerns about:

1. whether the behavior is problematic,
2. whether a child should be referred for mental health services, and
3. when an incident should be reported to the proper authorities.

Suggestions for professionals and parents

- Do not overreact as most sexual behaviors in children are within the typical or expected range.
- Inappropriate or problematic sexual behavior in children is not a clear indicator that a child has been sexually abused.
- Most children will stop the behavior if they are told the rules, mildly restricted, well supervised, and praised for appropriate behavior.
- If the sexual behavior is problematic that is;
 - a.) aggressive, coercive,
 - b.) intrusive, forceful,
 - c.) frequent, does not stop when told toreferral for mental health services is recommended.
- It is important to remember that children with problematic sexual behavior are significantly different from adolescent and adult sex offenders; these children **ARE NOT** sex offenders.
- A report to Child Protective Services (CPS) and/or law enforcement may be required by law for certain behaviors such as aggressive or forced sexual behavior.
- There is effective community-based treatment intervention for children with sexual behavior problems therefore, children should not automatically be removed from the home for this type of behavior

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