

UNDERSTANDING THE SEXUAL BEHAVIORS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

A Guide for Parents
and Professionals
Working with Young Children

Fairfax County
Department of Family Services

Prepared by a team of child development specialists working with children in the Fairfax-Falls Church community who represent the following agencies:

Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board

Fairfax County Department of Family Services

Fairfax County Health Department

Fairfax County Police Department

Fairfax County Public Schools

Childhelp USA® / Virginia

About this booklet...

This information has been specially developed to help parents and others understand and recognize what is considered normal sexual behavior of young children. It has been designed as a guide in determining whether a child's sexual behavior with other children can be managed with parental guidance, or if it may require help from a professional.

In addition, therapists, social workers, doctors, nurses, child care providers and others who work with children may find this a useful resource for parents seeking advice about a child's sexual behavior and/or for parents whose children display problem sexual behavior.

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Introduction

From infancy to preadolescence, children display a wide range of sexual behaviors. Very often, however, when parents discover that their child initiates or is involved in sexual behaviors with another child, they may wonder if the behavior is within the range of normal exploratory sexual play, or if it is a sign of a problem or, perhaps, an indication of sexual abuse.

As your child moves through different stages of development, he or she will engage in different forms of exploratory play. Some of this play may be of a sexual nature.

Discovering that a young child is involved in sexual behaviors with another child (or children) can sometimes be difficult to handle. A parent's first feelings may include shock, denial or anger. Displaying these feelings to the child or overreacting *could* cause a child's sexual behavior to "go underground."

A parent faces the challenge to:

- Respond in a calm, non-judgmental way that invites open communication.
- Determine whether the child's sexual behavior is within normal range or may need professional assistance.

What you consider to be problem sexual behaviors actually may be within the normal range of behavior for your child's age group. Sometimes children display or engage in sexual behavior as a result of having been sexually abused by an adult. However, sometimes the behavior may be a result of other causes, which will be discussed later.

Learning how to handle these situations and knowing when and where to seek outside help will allow you to respond to your child in a healthy way.

How today's children learn about sex

Despite parents' best attempts to monitor what their children see and hear, today's children are often exposed to a wide variety of sexual messages through the media.

Think about the ways **you** learned about sex as a child. Now think about the ways children learn about sex today. They are exposed to sexual themes, language and actual sexual scenes through news programs, television shows, commercials, soap operas, popular music, the Internet, movies and magazines.

Even the most well-meaning of parents cannot completely protect children from society's focus on sex and sexuality. These influences may lead naturally curious children to experiment sexually.



Children display sexuality differently at different ages

Parents, as well as professionals who work with young children, need to understand sexuality at various developmental stages of childhood. For example, toddlers and preschoolers are openly interested and curious about their own and others' bodies. Young school-aged children often are full of curiosity and questions, yet have an increased desire for privacy. Consequently, some sexual behaviors are hidden for a time. Preadolescent children (ages 9-12) demonstrate a heightened awareness of sexuality as they prepare for adolescence and adulthood.

It is also helpful to keep in mind family attitudes and customs with regard to privacy, openness about sex, and media exposure for children. Professionals should explore these areas with families when helping parents understand their child's sexuality.

A guide to the normal sexual behavior of children

The information in the following section serves as a general guide to children's normal sexual behaviors at different stages of development. However, children may exhibit few, all, or none of the sexual behaviors that are typical of their age range.

It is reprinted with permission of the author, psychologist Eliana Gil, Ph.D., who has gained national recognition in the area of children's sexual development and the assessment and treatment of abused children, sexually aggressive children, and "sexualized" children, that is, children who act out sexually beyond the norm.

Preschool (ages 0-5)

- Children find that touching or rubbing their genitals produces pleasurable sensations and touch themselves randomly.
- Children show their genitals to others.
- Children are curious about their bodies, and may want to touch or see other people's bodies.
- Children are fascinated with bodily functions and with language related to bodily functions (especially during the toilet-training phase).
- Children like playing "doctor" or "making babies" games.
- Children may become fascinated with sexual language and may want to observe others nude or in the bathroom, or they may want to be seen nude.
- In their own play, children often repeat what they have seen (for example, "mommy" and "daddy" dolls kissing or arguing).

Children may experiment with putting fingers or small objects inside their genital openings. (This behavior usually stops since it tends to hurt.)

Early school-age (ages 5-9)

- Children have more contact with peers and may touch each other through activities such as tickling and wrestling.
- Children may like to touch themselves in a less random way and more frequently; they have learned not to touch their genitals in public.
- Dirty jokes are common among children, but they may not be fully understood.
- Children begin to talk about sexual touching and sexual behaviors with their friends.
- Children begin to experience feelings of sexual arousal when masturbating and may want to produce that feeling again.
- Children ask questions such as, “Where did I come from?”
- Children are more inhibited and need privacy.
- Children may hold hands or kiss.
- Children become more aware of sexual preferences.

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Guide to normal sexual behavior... *(continued)*

Preadolescence (ages 9-12)

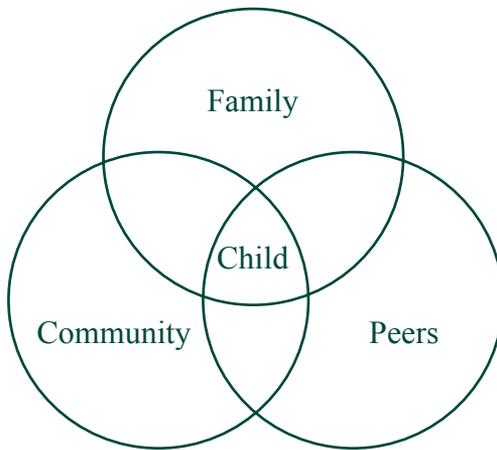
- Interest in sex increases and children may begin to experiment with sexual behaviors with other children.
- Puberty can begin as early as age nine; with the onset of puberty, boys are able to ejaculate and have “wet dreams.”
- “Locker room behavior” is quite common, including comparing genital size and function.
- Older children in this age range may begin to experiment with “petting” over and under clothes, French kissing, and touching or rubbing each other’s bodies.
- Masturbation may be a preferred pastime, although most children feel embarrassed and deny masturbating.
- Children may simulate intercourse (“dry humping”).
- Sexual intercourse is still uncommon at this age, although it is beginning to occur with greater frequency in today’s culture.



About children's relationships

As children grow up, the number of people with whom they come into contact increases. Infants and toddlers have contact primarily with family members and child care providers. School-aged children have a wider circle of people with whom they interact, including family, peers, teachers, friends, coaches, etc. Increased contacts may increase children's exposure to other children's sexual behaviors, and/or to sexual abuse. The number and types of contacts a child has should be considered when assessing his or her sexual behavior.

Circles of relationships



Family relationships

Parents can be instrumental in encouraging their children's sexual development in positive ways. Generally speaking, however, as children increasingly interact with others outside the family, parents have less direct supervision and influence over their children's sexual behaviors.

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Children's relationships... (continued)

Peer relationships

Contacts with peers increase as children reach school age. At this stage, children are more exposed to sex, ask more questions, and may privately experiment with other children. While this is normal behavior, parental guidance is required. When discovering sexual behavior between children, consider such factors as their relative age, size, and relationship to each other. Determine if both children agreed to the behavior or if one child acted over another's objection.

Community contacts

School-aged children have increased contacts with a variety of individuals and groups in the community. Unusual sexual behavior in a child combined with sudden shifts in attitudes about school, peers, or activities may indicate a problem. At this point, open communication with your child and involved adults is extremely important.

Warning signs of sexual behavior problems

Children may exhibit unusual sexual behaviors for a variety of reasons. The following signs or symptoms may not necessarily mean that a child has been sexually abused, but rather that the child may have other concerns which need to be addressed. Possible signs or indicators of problem sexual behavior might include:

- A wide discrepancy in the age of the children involved.
- An indication that a child was forced, threatened or intimidated into becoming involved in the sexual behavior, or that one child performed the behavior over the objection of another child.
- An escalating pattern of sexual behaviors.
- An indication that the child was tricked, lied to, or fooled into becoming involved in sexual behavior.

Healthy responses to a problem

Regardless of the reason for the child's sexual behavior, parents' reactions when discovering the behavior are critically important to the child's well-being. A healthy response by adults can have a positive long-term effect on building the child's sense of self-esteem, guiding future sexual development, and eliminating problem sexual behavior.

Teach your child at a very early age the difference between good, bad, confusing and private touching. This will help the child learn to prevent unwanted sexual touching from other children and adults. It will also help the child learn to respect other children and their rights.

Set limits for children with regard to sexual behavior. Avoid overreacting or being judgmental. Finally, do not hesitate to ask questions -- in a non-threatening way -- if your child exhibits new sexual behaviors and to seek help if you believe it is warranted.

The following are offered as guidelines:

- ***Upon learning that a child is involved in sexual behavior – stay calm.*** While a parent's first reaction is often shock and anger, this response may be more harmful to the child than the sexual behavior itself. An intense emotional reaction to the child's behavior may cause the child to become too frightened to talk about it. This may prevent the child from providing information about where the behavior was learned.
- ***When discovering children involved in sexual play, change their activity.*** Redirecting their behavior accomplishes two things: it gently provides a message to the child that the behavior may be inappropriate, and it allows time for you to collect your thoughts and explore ways to respond.

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Healthy responses... (continued)

- ***When the time is right, sit down and have a quiet talk with the child.*** Making sure there are no distractions, ask the child in an open-ended, non-leading way about the sexual behavior. For example, you might say, “Tell me how you learned about (name of behavior).” Ask questions to determine if both children agreed to the behavior or if one child acted over another child’s objection. Do not assume that the child is a “victim” of sexual behavior.
- ***Next, consider your child’s stage of development*** to determine whether the behavior is typical sexual play or if it is overly “sexualized” behavior – that is, behavior beyond the norm. Using the information in this booklet or asking a child therapist or physician may help.

As mentioned earlier, children may exhibit few, all, or none of the sexual behaviors that are typical of their age range. If you discover your child engaging in sexual behavior, use this as an opportunity to talk with him or her about privacy, appropriate and inappropriate behavior, respect for their own and others’ bodies and preventing sexual abuse.



When parents need to seek help

Additional help may be necessary when a child's unusual or inappropriate sexual behavior continues in spite of parental intervention. It may also be necessary when the child's sexual behavior is completely outside the normal behavior for that age range.

The following resources may be helpful when considering professional assistance:

- **Schools** -- School staff, including principals, guidance counselors, teachers, psychologists, nurses and social workers may be helpful in providing information about your child's behavior. Check with the school to see if your child's sexual behavior has been observed in the school setting.
- **Child care providers and organizations** -- A child care provider may be able to shed some light on your child's behavior. Child care provider agencies can offer information and guidance materials to assist you in managing your child's behavior.
- **Mental health professionals** -- Child psychologists, social workers and licensed counselors can provide assistance in assessing your child's sexual behavior and development. Therapy is available to sexually abused children to help them recover.
- **Medical professionals** -- Family doctors and pediatricians can help determine if your child's sexual behavior is normal, and also if your child may need medical attention. This also may help you in determining if there is a medical reason for your child's sexual behavior.

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Need to seek help... *(continued)*

- **Social services/child protective services** -- Social workers or child protective services hotline professionals will provide services or help you locate assistance for you and your child. If you suspect that your child has been sexually abused by another parent, adult or caretaker, report your suspicion to your local child protective services agency.
- **Police** -- Not all young children who act out sexually have been sexually abused; however, some may have been. If your child discloses sexual abuse by another child, a teenager or an adult, report it to local police in the jurisdiction where the incident may have occurred.

A nal word...

The power of parenting is often underestimated when it comes to helping children experience their sexual development in a positive way. If, however, after considering this information, you still have concerns about your child's sexual behaviors; consult the following resources for additional guidance.

Resources in Fairfax County

Department of Family Services (Social Services)

Child Protective Services Hotline	703-324-7400
Family & Child Services	703-324-7500*
* Ask to be referred to a family intake worker	
Office for Children	703-324-8000

Police Department (Fairfax County)

Emergency	9-1-1
<i>Child Services Unit</i>	703-246-7800**

**** Please note: When you call this phone number ask to speak with someone in the *Child Services Unit*.**

Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board (Mental Health Services)

Victim Assistance Network	703-360-7273
Community Mental Health Centers	
<i>Mount Vernon (Route 1)</i>	703-360-6910
<i>Northwest (Reston)</i>	703-481-4100
<i>Springfield</i>	703-866-2100
<i>Woodburn (Fairfax)</i>	703-573-0523

Health Department

Fairfax (<i>Joseph Willard Health Center</i>)	703-246-7100
Falls Church	703-534-8343
Herndon/Reston	703-481-4242
Route 1/Mount Vernon	703-704-5203
Springfield	703-569-1031

Childhelp USA® Children's Center of Virginia

(Child abuse prevention, intervention and treatment)

Main Number	703-208-1500
Abuse prevention programs for children	703-208-1535
Abuse training programs for adults	703-208-1532
Abuse crisis counseling and referral services –	1-800-422-4453
Childhelp USA® National Child Abuse Hotline	1-800-4-A-CHILD®

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William Pithers, Alison Gray, Carolyn Cunningham, and Sandy Lane, “From Trauma to Understanding: A Guide for Parents of Children with Sexual Behavior Problems, Safer Society Press”, 1991.

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Child abuse prevention, intervention and treatment
(703) 208-1500
www.childhelpusa.org/virginia/



Fairfax County is committed to nondiscrimination on the basis of disability in all county programs, services and activities. Reasonable accommodations will be provided upon request. For more information, call 703-324-7873; TTY 703-222-9452. To request this information in an alternate format, call 703-324-5870; TTY 703-222-9452.

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