

## CHILDREN'S SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

Children's sexual behaviour develops over time, like other areas of growth. Many behaviours are healthy and are normal for children at certain ages. On the other hand, there are some behaviours which we should be concerned about. These behaviours are "worrisome" and should not be ignored or seen as child's play. The parent/caregiver may need to redirect the child, or consider asking for advice on what to do. Other behaviours are more serious and may even be dangerous to the child and others. These children may need professional help, and the parent/caregiver should talk with someone who understands the sexual development of children (for example, a doctor, a public health nurse, or a child protection worker).

The behaviours in the first chart are mostly seen in toddlers and preschoolers, but may also be seen in older children. The second chart looks at behaviours common in older children (adapted from Johnson, Updated Understanding Children's Behaviors, What's Natural And Healthy, 2004). The third chart outlines adolescent sexual behaviour (adapted from Family Planning Queensland, Traffic Lights – sexual behaviours from birth to eighteen. Version 1, 2006, [http://www.fpq.com.au/pdf/Fs\\_Sexual\\_Behaviours.pdf](http://www.fpq.com.au/pdf/Fs_Sexual_Behaviours.pdf); and FOCUS Adolescent Services. The Range of Teenage Sexual Behavior, 2008. <http://www.focusas.com/SexualBehavior-Range.html>).

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### SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR IN TODDLERS & PRESCHOOLERS

TYPE OF BEHAVIOUR	OKAY	WORRISOME	GET HELP
CURIOSITY BEHAVIOURS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– asks appropriate questions about sex, for example "where do babies come from?"</li> <li>– children learn to name parts of the body</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– shows fear when talking about anything to do with sex</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– does not stop asking questions about sex</li> <li>– knows too much about sexuality for age and stage of development.</li> </ul>
SELF-EXPLORATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– likes to be naked</li> <li>– has erections</li> <li>– is curious and enjoys exploring own body touches own genitals as a self-soothing behaviour (for example, when</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– self-stimulates on furniture, toys and uses objects to self-stimulate</li> <li>– imitates sexual behaviour with dolls or toys</li> <li>– continues to self-</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– self-stimulates in public or in private instead of playing in other activities.</li> <li>– self-stimulates on other people</li> <li>– harms own genitals,</li> </ul>

	<p>going to sleep, when feeling sick, tense or afraid)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– very aware of genital area during toilet training</li> <li>– puts objects in own genitals or buttocks without it feeling uncomfortable</li> </ul>	<p>stimulate in public after being told that this behaviour should take place in private</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– puts something in genitals, buttocks even when it feels uncomfortable</li> </ul>	<p>buttocks</p>
<p>BEHAVIOUR WITH OTHERS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– explores the bodies of other children when playing</li> <li>– if people are naked, the child likes to look wants to touch genitals, to see what they feel like</li> <li>– may show his/her genitals or buttocks to others</li> <li>– may take off clothes in front of others</li> <li>– sees these behaviours as fun and silly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– continues to play games like “doctor” after asked not to</li> <li>– always wants to touch other people</li> <li>– tries to do adult sexual behaviours</li> <li>– copies adult sexual activity with clothes on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– forces, bullies other children to take their clothes off or do sexual things</li> <li>– sad, angry or aggressive scenes between people is shown in dramatic play</li> <li>– demands to see the genitals of other children or adults</li> <li>– tricks or forces other children into touching genitals, adult sexual behaviours, copying sexual acts with clothes off, oral sex</li> </ul>
<p>BATHROOM, TOILETING AND SEXUAL FUNCTIONS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– interested in peeing and pooing</li> <li>– is curious about and tries to see what people are doing in the bathroom</li> <li>– some preschoolers want privacy in the bathroom and when changing</li> <li>– uses unacceptable words for toileting and sexual functions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– spreads poo purposefully</li> <li>– pees in places they shouldn’t</li> <li>– often caught watching others who want privacy in the bathroom</li> <li>– continues to use unacceptable words after asked not to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– keeps on spreading poo</li> <li>– continues to pee in places they shouldn’t</li> <li>– does not allow others privacy in the bathroom or bedroom</li> <li>– does not care about the rules set for unacceptable language and continues to use it</li> </ul>

RELATIONSHIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- plays house with other children</li> <li>- kisses and hugs people who are important to him/her</li> <li>- may share what they have found out about sex</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- when talks about adult relationships, refers to sex a lot</li> <li>- afraid of being kissed or hugged</li> <li>- talks or acts in a sexual way with others</li> <li>- uses sexual language even after asked not to</li> <li>- talks about sex or includes sex in play instead of doing other things</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- imitates adult sexual behaviour in detail</li> <li>- being touched causes fear</li> <li>- talks in a sexual way even with people s/he does not know</li> </ul>
BEHAVIOUR WITH ANIMALS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- curious about how animals have babies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- touches genitals of animals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sexual behaviour with animals</li> </ul>

## SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

TYPE OF BEHAVIOUR	OKAY	WORRISOME	GET HELP
RELATIONSHIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– thinks children of the opposite sex are “gross”</li> <li>– chases children of the opposite sex</li> <li>– talks about sex with friends, talks about having a boyfriend/girlfriend</li> <li>– older children play games with peers about sex</li> <li>– likes telling and listening to dirty jokes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– refuses contact with specific individual(s)</li> <li>– uses sexual language to insult or scare others</li> <li>– wants to play games related to sex with younger or older children</li> <li>– continues to tell dirty jokes after asked not to</li> <li>– makes sexual sounds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– hurts and/or avoids certain types of people (e.g. the opposite sex, people with certain features such as facial hair)</li> <li>– cannot seem to stop talking about sex and sexual acts</li> <li>– sees all relationships in a sexual way</li> <li>– forces others to play sexual games</li> <li>– continues to tell dirty jokes even after being disciplined</li> </ul>
NATURE OF SEXUAL AWARENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– includes genitals on drawing of people</li> <li>– looks at pictures of naked people</li> <li>– makes fun of the opposite sex</li> <li>– shows that s/he wants privacy respected</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– includes genitals in drawings of one sex and not the other</li> <li>– genitals are a main feature in pictures, or are larger than the rest of the body parts</li> <li>– overly-curious with pictures of naked people</li> <li>– wants to be the opposite sex becomes very upset when privacy is not respected</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– drawings may include adult sexual activity, sexual abuse of a child</li> <li>– hates being a boy or girl</li> <li>– hates own genitals</li> <li>– demands privacy in an aggressive or overly upset way</li> </ul>

## ADOLESCENT SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

TYPE OF BEHAVIOUR	OKAY	WORRISOME	GET HELP
RELATIONSHIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– sexual conversations with peers</li> <li>– sexual jokes within the cultural norm</li> <li>– plays games with sexual themes (e.g., spin the bottle)</li> <li>– interested in having a romantic relationship with another person</li> <li>– sexual preference emerges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– embarrasses peers with sexual themes (especially if aggressive)</li> <li>– wants to play games with sexual themes with individuals who are outside the legal age of consent*</li> <li>– acts overtly sexual/seductive to gain status among peers</li> <li>– refuses contact with a specific individual(s)</li> <li>– makes sexual noises or gestures at inappropriate times</li> <li>– violates others' body space: overreacts when own boundaries are violated</li> <li>– develops risky online relationships and behaviors (e.g., with those outside the legal age of consent)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– degrades or humiliates others with sexual comments</li> <li>– forces peers to play sexual games</li> <li>– sexually aggressive manner</li> <li>– feels unsafe in a relationship</li> <li>– sexually focused conversation with an individual(s) outside of the legal age of consent</li> </ul>

\*The Criminal Code of Canada sets out the laws regarding consent to sexual acts (amended May 1, 2008); this includes any sexual behaviour, not just intercourse.

- 16 is the age of consent to sexual acts.
- Children under 12 can never legally consent to sexual acts.
- The Criminal Code recognizes that adolescents engage in exploratory sexual behaviour (i.e., "youthful sexual experimentation"), and 12 and 13 year-olds may not be charged criminally if consent for sexual involvement is mutual, and there is no more than 2 years difference in age

between the individuals. However, if one of the youth is in a position of trust or authority over the other youth, then consent is not valid. For example, it would not be against the law for a 15 year-old and a 13 year-old to be involved sexually if they have both consented, unless the 15 year-old is in a position of trust or authority (e.g., a babysitter or coach).

- Children who are 14 and 15 years old may consent to sexual involvement that is mutual, with a person who is a maximum of 5 years older. For example, it would be legal for a 15 year-old and a 19 year-old to be involved sexually if they have both consented, unless the 19 year-old is in a position of trust or authority.
- The Criminal Code further tries to protect teens who are 16 & 17 years of age from sexual exploitation by a person who is in a position of trust or authority. Teenagers in this age range may legally consent to sexual acts with someone who is not in a position of trust or authority. For example, a 16-year-old can legally consent to sexual involvement with a 20 year-old. However, if the 20 year-old were his/her tutor, then s/he would be committing an offence if they engaged in sexual behaviour, even if the 16-year-old consented. The 20 year old is in a position of trust or authority over the 16-year-old and therefore, consent is not valid. When someone is in a position of trust or authority, s/he is responsible for not taking advantage of anyone under the age of 18.

(Adolescent Sexual Behaviour, continued)

TYPE OF BEHAVIOUR	OKAY	WORRISOME	GET HELP
SEXUAL INTERESTS/ ACTIVITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– interest in erotica** (e.g., magazines and movies)</li> <li>– sexual fantasies used to create arousal or to prepare for a sexual encounter</li> <li>– use of Internet chat</li> <li>– interested in learning about/obtaining methods of birth control</li> <li>– inquires about sexually transmitted infections (STIs)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– pornographic** interest</li> <li>– preoccupied with sexual thoughts/anxieties</li> <li>– sexual graffiti</li> <li>– sexual fantasies involving children</li> <li>– provides personal information to an individual(s) online or arranges to meet in person</li> <li>– participates in Xrated chat rooms</li> <li>– engages in discussions about sex with people online that they do not know</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– preoccupation with [violent] pornography</li> <li>– obsessive thoughts about sexual activities</li> <li>– participates in adults only online dating sites and/or meets face-to-face with an adult(s)</li> <li>– views and/or distributes child pornography</li> </ul>

\*\*In Canada, pornography is divided into 3 categories: (1) explicit sex with violence; (2) explicit sex without violence but is degrading or dehumanizing; and (3) explicit sex without violence that is neither degrading nor dehumanizing. Violence includes both physical violence and threats of physical violence. Erotica falls under category 3, as erotic materials do depict sexual acts for the purpose of arousal; however, erotic materials do not depict violence or acts that degrade or dehumanize individuals.

(Adolescent Sexual Behaviour, continued)

TYPE OF BEHAVIOUR	OKAY	WORRISOME	GET HELP
SEXUAL ACTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– private masturbation</li> <li>– consensual activities such as hugging, kissing, holding hands</li> <li>– foreplay involving “making out” and fondling</li> <li>– mutual masturbation</li> <li>– consensual intercourse in the context of a romantic or dating relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– voyeurism (i.e., the practice of being sexually aroused by secretly watching others undress or engage in sexual acts, also known as “peeping tom”)</li> <li>– exposes oneself (e.g., “mooning,” “flashing”)</li> <li>– promiscuity (i.e., indiscriminate sexual activity with more than one partner during the same period of time)</li> <li>– engages in high-risk sexual behaviour, (e.g., unprotected sex, sexual activity while using alcohol or illicit substances)</li> <li>– sends naked/provocative pictures of oneself or others (e.g., online, through text message, “sexting”)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– compulsive masturbation (especially if in public, or when directed to stop and disregards direction, or if harmful to oneself)</li> <li>– attempts to expose others’ genitals</li> <li>– coerces others to engage in sexual activity without their consent</li> <li>– sexual contact with animals</li> <li>– sends naked/provocative pictures of oneself or others for malicious intent (e.g., for the purposes of selling photos; distributing for a vindictive reason)</li> </ul>