

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). Sexual behaviours are concerning when there is a notable difference in age, intellectual/developmental functioning or size between the children/adolescents involved, and when threats, force and/or violence are used to involve others in the behaviour(s) or keep them from disclosing.

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 school-age children (adapted from Johnson, T. *Understanding Children’s Behaviors, What’s Natural And Healthy*, 2015). The third chart outlines adolescent sexual behaviour (adapted from Family Planning Queensland, *Sexual Behaviours in Children & Young People: A guide to identify, understand, and respond to Sexual Behaviours*, 2012, <http://www.wbsass.com.au/themes/default/basemedia/content/files/Traffic-LightsBrochure.pdf>).

For the “Worrisome and “Get Help” behaviours related to technology and the Internet that may appear in school-aged children, see the *Adolescent Sexual Behaviour* charts.

The behaviours described in the charts do not take into account cultural or religious beliefs and values.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR IN TODDLERS & PRESCHOOLERS

TYPE OF BEHAVIOUR	OKAY	WORRISOME	GET HELP
CURIOSITY BEHAVIOURS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – asks questions about sex, for example “where do babies come from?” – children learn to name parts of the body, including genitalia – interested in having/birthing a baby – explores differences between males and females 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – shows fear when talking about sexual topics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – does not stop asking questions about sex – knows too much about sex for age and stage of development

<p>SELF-EXPLORATION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – likes to be naked – has erections – is curious and enjoys exploring own body – touches own genitals as a self-soothing behaviour (for example, when going to sleep, when feeling sick, tense or afraid) – very aware of genital area during toilet training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – self-stimulates on furniture, toys and uses objects to self-stimulate – imitates sexual behaviour with dolls or toys – continues to self-stimulate in public after being told that this behaviour should take place in private – puts objects in own genitals or buttocks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – chooses to self-stimulate in public or private instead of engaging in other activities – excessively self-stimulates in private – self-stimulates on other people – harms own genitals, buttocks
<p>BATHROOM, TOILETING AND SEXUAL FUNCTIONS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – interested in urination and bowel movements – curious about and tries to see what people are doing in the bathroom – may want privacy in the bathroom and when changing – uses inappropriate words for toileting and sexual functions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – spreads feces purposefully – urinates in places they shouldn't – often caught watching others who want privacy in the bathroom – continues to use inappropriate words even after being asked not to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – keeps on spreading feces – continues to urinate in places they shouldn't – does not allow others privacy in the bathroom or bedroom – does not care about the rules set for inappropriate language and continues to use it
<p>BEHAVIOUR WITH OTHERS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – explores the bodies of other children when playing – if people are naked, the child likes to look and wants to touch genitals to see what they feel like – may show their genitals or buttocks to others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – continues to play games like "doctor" after asked not to – always wants to touch other people – tries to do adult sexual behaviours – copies adult sexual activity with clothes on – when talks about adult relationships, refers to sex a lot 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – forces, bullies other children to take their clothes off or do sexual things – sad, angry or aggressive scenes between people is shown in dramatic play – demands to see the genitals of other children or adults

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - may take off clothes in front of others - sees these behaviours as fun and silly - plays house with other children - kisses and hugs people who are important to them - may share what they have found out about sex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - afraid of being kissed or hugged - talks or acts in a sexual way with others - uses sexual language even after asked not to - talks about sex or engages in play about sex instead of doing other things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tricks or forces other children into touching genitals, adult sexual behaviours, copying sexual acts with clothes off, oral sex - imitates adult sexual behaviour in detail - sexual behaviour with other children involves secrecy - talks in a sexual way even with people they do not know - physical contact with others causes anxiety - being touched causes fear
BEHAVIOUR WITH ANIMALS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - curious about how animals have babies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - touches genitals of animals, even after being asked not to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sexual behaviour with animals

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

TYPE OF BEHAVIOUR	OKAY	WORRISOME	GET HELP
BEHAVIOUR WITH OTHERS/RELATIONSHIPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - thinks children of the opposite gender are “gross” - chases children of the opposite sex - talks about sex with friends, talks about having a romantic relationship - older children play games with peers about sex - likes telling and listening to dirty jokes - may begin to explore websites, apps, etc. with sexual content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - refuses contact with specific individual(s) - uses sexual language to insult or scare others - romanticizes all relationships - wants to play games related to sex with younger or older children - continues to tell dirty jokes after asked not to - makes sexual sounds at inappropriate times - may self-produce, send, respond to sexual images, text messages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - hurts and/or avoids certain types of people (e.g., people of a gender identity different from their own, people with certain features such as facial hair) - cannot seem to stop talking about sex and sexual acts, even after asked not to - sees all relationships in a sexual way - forces others to play sexual games - continues to tell dirty jokes even after being disciplined
NATURE OF SEXUAL AWARENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - includes genitals on drawings of people - looks at pictures of naked people (e.g., magazines, online) - makes fun of people with a gender identity different from their own 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - genitals are a main feature in pictures, or are larger than the rest of the body parts - overly-curious with pictures of naked people - becomes very upset when privacy is not respected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - drawings may include adult sexual activity, sexual abuse of a child - hates own genitals - demands privacy in an aggressive or overly upset way

	– shows that they want privacy respected		
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ADOLESCENT SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

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

*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 (e.g., hugging, kissing, touching).

- 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 was the teen’s tutor, then the tutor 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, they are 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"> – interest in erotica** (e.g., magazines and movies) – sexual fantasies used to create arousal or to prepare for a sexual encounter – private masturbation – mutual masturbation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – pornographic** interest – preoccupied with sexual thoughts/anxieties – voyeurism (i.e., the practice of being sexually aroused by secretly watching others undress or engage in sexual acts, also known as “peeping tom”) – exposes oneself (e.g., “mooning,” “flashing”) – sexual fantasies involving children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – preoccupation with [violent] adult pornography – compulsive masturbation (especially if in public, or when directed to stop and disregards direction, or if harmful to oneself) – obsessive thoughts about sexual activities – attempts to expose others’ genitals

**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"> – consensual activities such as hugging, kissing, holding hands – foreplay involving “making out” and fondling – consensual intercourse in the context of a romantic or dating relationship – interested in learning about/obtaining methods of birth control – inquires about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) – use of online spaces (e.g., chat rooms, apps) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – promiscuity (i.e., indiscriminate sexual activity with more than one partner during the same period of time) – engages in high-risk sexual behaviour, (e.g., unprotected sex, sexual activity while using alcohol or illicit substances) – participates in Xrated online spaces (e.g., chat rooms, apps) – sends naked/provocative pictures of oneself or others (e.g., online, through text message, “sexting”) – engages in discussions about sex with people online that they have only met online – provides personal information to an individual(s) online and/or arranges to meet in person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – coerces others to engage in sexual activity without their consent – sexual contact with animals – engages in sexual activity in exchange for money, goods, drugs/alcohol – sends naked/provocative pictures of oneself or others for malicious intent (e.g., for the purposes of selling photos; distributing for a vindictive reason) – participates in adults only online dating sites – meets face-to-face with someone they have only met online – views and/or distributes child abuse media – participates in technology-assisted abuse/exploitation

		- becomes secretive/overly protective about their technological and/or online activities	
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