



Sexual Behavior in Children: *What Parents Should Know*

DO CHILDREN DISPLAY SEXUAL BEHAVIORS?

Young children want to be physically close to their parents. Touch is a fundamental part of what young children need from their parents. They also are curious, and they typically are interested in their (and other people's) genitals and breasts from an early age. Exploring their genitals and wanting to see or touch other's genitals is not at all unusual.

WHAT SHOULD PARENTS TELL THEIR CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUAL BEHAVIORS?

Talking about sexual behaviors with your children can be scary and uncomfortable because we don't want to say the wrong thing. Often parents shy away from these conversations or avoid them. However, often times children raise questions about their body or about something that they may have heard or seen regarding sex or sexuality. It is important to answer your child's questions as calmly as you can, using words that they can understand and that are developmentally appropriate. Parents want to give their children permission to come to them if there is something strange, uncomfortable or confusing going on. Children pick up on their parent's discomfort and shut down, so it is essential to show them that you are glad that they are coming to you to talk about these issues, and it is OK to talk openly about sex and sexual behaviors. It is also important that parents set up rules in the house for privacy in the bathroom or bedrooms.

WHAT IF I THINK MY CHILD WAS SEXUALLY ABUSED?

Teach your kids about appropriate boundaries. This includes good touch/bad touch such as who can touch one's private parts (only parents, caregivers, and doctors). While it is important to teach about stranger danger, it is more important to tell them that family members, neighbors, babysitters, and other close people in their life can also touch kids inappropriately. In fact, it is much more likely that a child will be sexually abused by someone they know rather than a stranger.

Tell your child that if they feel uncomfortable or confused about something that is happening to them, they should **TELL A TRUSTED ADULT** (for example, their parent, other relative, or a teacher) as soon as possible. If that person doesn't do anything to stop it, then they should **KEEP TELLING TRUSTED ADULTS UNTIL SOMEBODY DOES SOMETHING**.

Often parents believe that sexual abuse can cause a lifetime of problems. Most of the time this is not true. Children are resilient and can successfully work through these issues by talking about it with their parents and getting professional help.

THE MOST IMPROTANT THING IS THAT THE CHILD IS BELIEVED THAT THEY ARE NOT BLAMED FOR THEIR BEHAVIORS. Believe your child, listen to them, and tell them that whatever happened is not their fault.



"GREEN FLAG": WHAT KIND OF SEXUAL BEHAVIORS ARE TYPICAL IN CHILDREN?

Green Flag Examples:

- Playing Doctor/Playing House
- Touching one's Private Parts in public or private
- Viewing or touching a peer, and adult or a siblings' genitals
- Rubbing one's body against others

Other reassuring signs that the behaviors are typical:

- **Behaviors are Transient**
- **Behaviors can be Easily Diverted with Redirection**
- Behaviors are Mutual (There is no forcing or Coercion)
- Behaviors DO NOT Cause Anxiety or DO NOT Make the Kids Uncomfortable



"RED FLAG": WHAT KIND OF SEXUAL BEHAVIORS ARE PROBLEMATIC OR WORRISOME IN CHILDREN

Red Flag Behaviors are:

- **ANY sexual behavior that involves a child 3 or more years younger than your child**
- Behaviors are Frequent
- **Behaviors are Associated with Physical Aggression or Coercion**
- **Behaviors CANNOT be Easily Diverted with Redirection**
- Behaviors are Compulsive (child cannot stop when told to)
- Behaviors cause Anxiety or Make the Kids Uncomfortable
- **Behavior Continues Even After Parent or School Personnel Intervene**

A COMMON EXAMPLE:

You find your 5 y.o. child and a peer under the table playing house, and they are both naked. Try to **compose yourself and resist the impulse** to tell them that they have done something "wrong" or "bad." If you tell them to stop, redirect their behavior, and they stop, then this is not a problem and is a **GREEN FLAG** behavior. If they keep doing it over and over, or your child is playing the game with multiple children after being told to stop, this becomes more concerning and moves to a **RED FLAG** behavior.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I AM CONCERNED ABOUT MY CHILD'S BEHAVIOR(S)?

If you have concerns about your child's behavior or that something sexual may have happened to them, talk to your pediatrician or family doctor. This is also true if you have concerns that your child may be touching someone else, such as a sibling, peer or another family member.

Your pediatrician can help assess the situation and take the next steps to best take care of your child's mental health to insure that they are safe and getting the help that they need.