

Understanding child sexual behaviour

Information for early childhood education and care professionals

It is typical for children to engage in a range of sexual behaviours throughout their childhood. Child sexual development, like all development, occurs within complex cultural, social, familial and psychological contexts. As a mandatory reporter, knowing what sexual behaviours are developmentally expected at different ages helps notice when behaviours may need further attention.

What are developmentally expected sexual behaviours?

Developmentally expected behaviours align with a child's physical, cognitive and social development. They are mutual, consensual and play-based, and they occur between children of similar ability levels. Children engaging in developmentally expected sexual behaviours are easily redirected and their family context is generally safe and supportive to facilitate an educational response.

It is important not to rely only on a checklist of behaviours to decide whether something is harmful. As with all behaviour, sexual behaviour must always be understood in context.

Ages 0-2

At this age children are exploring and discovering their bodies through touch/sensory play. Behaviours are spontaneous, curious, easily redirected. This may include:

- Enjoying physical closeness e.g. cuddling, hugging, stroking
- Spontaneous genital touching without intent to 'self-stimulate' e.g., during nappy changes
- Testing independence and sensory feedback e.g. include removing clothes

Ages 3-5

At this age children are naturally curious about bodies – theirs and others. Behaviours occur with peers of similar age and ability and are curious in nature. This may include:

- Asking questions about bodies and anatomy e.g. "Where do babies come from"
- Occasional self-stimulation (rubbing genital area) without secrecy
- Role-playing adult relationships (kissing, hugging, doctors, caring for "babies") that may involve looking at private parts as part of imaginative play
- Mutual exploration with peers of similar age, without coercion, force, or power imbalance.

Ages 6-9

At this age children begin understanding privacy. Children may engage in exploratory and mutual behaviours with peers that are easily redirected by adults. This may include:

- Asking more detailed questions and increased interest in anatomy and sex education
- Growing need for privacy and genital exploration being less overt and more private
- Growing interest in sex-related words, jokes, humour and stories
- Brief curiosity about peer/siblings' bodies, especially if there are visible changes

- Comparing body parts in games (“Show me yours, I’ll show you mine”) without force or shame
- Playing games involving kissing or role-playing family dynamics
- Interest in romantic ideas (cartoons, books about relationships) and exploring gender roles

When might child sexual behaviours need further attention?

Behaviours outside the typical range of developmentally expected behaviours are referred to as ‘harmful sexual behaviour’. This term acknowledges the seriousness of the behaviour and the impact it has on the child or children involved. Harmful sexual behaviour may occur in any setting and can be self-directed or directed towards others.

Harmful sexual behaviours include those where consent is unclear, or there is an imbalance of age, size, power or status. They also include behaviours involving force, coercion, violence or secrecy, or which are intrusive or disruptive to a child’s functioning or development.

There are many experiences or conditions which can contribute to harmful sexual behaviours. These can include domestic violence, inadequate sexual boundaries, disrupted attachments and other forms of abuse or neglect, including sexual abuse. In early childhood, there is an increased likelihood that harmful sexual behaviours have been influenced by experiences of child sexual abuse.

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse occurs when a child experiences sexual behaviour they don’t understand, don’t consent to, or is otherwise unlawful. Children experience sexual abuse within a broad context of relationships including peers, siblings, parents, extended family members and extrafamilial community members, including adults working in child-serving organisations.

Indicators of child sexual abuse

Only a small number of children and young people will directly tell or convey to someone that they have been sexually abused. It’s more common for children and young people to tell people indirectly or inadvertently through behavioural changes.

If a child shows any of the signs below, it doesn’t necessarily mean they’ve experienced sexual abuse. A child’s behaviour can change for many reasons. However, these signs are indicators that something may be wrong and it’s important they are taken seriously.

Physical signs

Physical signs that a child may have experienced sexual abuse include:

- recurring headaches or stomach aches
- bed-wetting, nightmares and sleep disturbances
- change in appetite and/or weight loss
- redness, swelling or discharge in the genital area, or pain or burning when going to the toilet

Behavioural signs

Emotional or behavioural changes that a child may have experienced sexual abuse could include:

- sudden onset of emotional outbursts, self-harm and heightened aggression
- unexplained regression in developmental achievements
- sexual behaviours that are not developmentally expected

Where can I get further information?

For further information about child sexual behaviour, refer to:

- [Child Sexual Abuse Practice Kit – Child Sexual Development](#)
- [Recognising Developmentally Expected Sexual Behaviours](#)
- [Developmental and Harmful Sexual Behaviour Continuum at a Glance](#)

Who do I talk to if I have concerns about a child?

If you are unsure about what to do if you have concerns about a child's behaviour, you can:

- talk about your concerns with your work colleagues
- refer to the **Child Protection Guide** <https://www.families.qld.gov.au/our-work/child-safety/about-child-protection/child-protection-guide>
- call **Family and Child Connect** on **13 FAMILY or 13 32 64** for information and advice
- call a **Child Safety Regional Intake Service** (between 9:00am and 5:00pm, Monday to Friday) if you have formed a reasonable suspicion that a child has suffered, is suffering, or is at unacceptable risk of suffering significant harm caused by physical or sexual abuse, and there is not a parent willing and able to protect the child from harm:
 - Brisbane and Moreton Bay: 1300 682 254
 - South East Queensland: 1300 679 849
 - South West Queensland (Darling Downs): 1300 683 390
 - South West Queensland (West Moreton): 1800 316 855
 - North Queensland: 1300 706 147
 - Sunshine Coast and Central Queensland: 1300 703 762
 - Far North Queensland: 1300 684 062
- call **Child Safety After Hours Service Centre** (outside of business hours) on 1800 177 135 or 3235 9999

Be aware that it is a criminal offence for any adult not to report a reasonable suspicion of sexual offending against a child by another adult to police. For more detail about this offence see [Failing to report sexual offences against children | Your rights, crime and the law | Queensland Government \(www.qld.gov.au\)](#)