

# SEXUALIZED BEHAVIOUR IN CHILDREN

A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING NORMAL  
VERSUS CONCERNING BEHAVIOUR IN  
CHILDREN 12 YEARS OLD AND UNDER

FOR PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH CHILDREN



CANADIAN CENTRE *for* CHILD PROTECTION®  
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# INTRODUCTION

Adults working with children need to help manage situations and behaviours between children on a regular basis. However, when children demonstrate sexualized behavior, adults often feel uneasy about how to address it. Understanding what healthy child sexual development and behavior looks like can help you feel more confident and able to respond effectively.

Child sexual behaviour occurs on a continuum and not all sexualized behaviours are problematic. In fact, much of children's behaviours are considered developmentally appropriate and normal. Yet, on the other end of the spectrum, some sexualized behaviours in children can be a red flag that a child is in distress and needs help.

This guide is intended to help adults who work with children understand the range of sexualized behaviours in children. This will help adults support children and respond appropriately when these situations occur.

## A MEASURE FOR WHAT'S NORMAL AND WHAT'S NOT

### Normal: Playful Curiosity and Exploration

- » Typically, when a sexual behaviour is connected to children's curiosity and perceived as fun and playful for the children involved, there are no red flags and no cause for concern (e.g., playfully peeking under the bathroom stalls, or playing, "I'll show you mine, if you show me yours.")



**For many sexualized behaviours in children no intervention from adults is required.**



## Concerning: Explicit and Preoccupied

- » A child preoccupied with sexual behaviour, such as persistently wanting to touch their own and/or others genitals and is resistant to redirection
- » Engaging in behaviour beyond their developmental stage
- » Behaving in a very sexually explicit or overt way, such as trying to French kiss other children or adults
- » A child using force or intimidation combined with sexual behaviour

Research shows that preschool-aged children who have been sexually abused show more sexual behaviour than children who have not experienced abuse. This is not to say that all children who act out sexually have experienced abuse or that all children who experience sexual abuse act out sexually, but uncommon or concerning behaviour requires careful consideration by adults. Behaviour that is intrusive, hurtful, and/or age inappropriate requires careful consideration, can be an indication of underlying emotional problems, **or** that the child is living or has lived in an environment where they experienced inconsistent caregiving, violence, abuse, or neglect. The child may have also been exposed to pornography or other sexually explicit materials.

## FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN OBSERVING SEXUALIZED BEHAVIOUR IN CHILDREN

There are a number of important factors to consider when an adult needs to determine whether a child's sexualized behaviour is normal or cause for concern:

- » Age
- » Developmental level
- » Gender
- » Education
- » Culture\*
- » Religion\*
- » Awareness
- » Family attitudes towards sexuality \*

\* Note: These factors — culture, religion, family attitudes towards sexuality — typically influence a child's comfort level with nudity and/or their knowledge of sex, however, these factors alone typically do not result in concerning sexualized behaviours.





**Age, cultural norms, and taboos are key factors that influence when and where children learn which behaviours are acceptable and which are not.**

### **Other Considerations:**

- » Children typically learn to be discrete and selective in displaying certain behaviours such as touching or showing genitals in public. Displaying this behaviour in public after seven years old may be an indication of a stress response or trauma.
- » For many children age seven is the age at which certain behaviours reduce in frequency, such as trying to touch a mother's breasts.
- » A behaviour that is considered normal by the parents can become problematic, if the frequency is such that it becomes disruptive to the child and/or others. For example, children are very curious about naked bodies, however, if this interest begins to interfere with their play or consumes all their interests and time, then it would be considered problematic.



**There are reasons why children may demonstrate sexualized behaviours other than sexual abuse.**



Models in image and intended as illustrative.



# RANGE OF SEXUALIZED BEHAVIOURS IN CHILDREN

## COMMON BEHAVIOURS AMONG CHILDREN UP TO SIX OR SEVEN YEARS OLD



- » Touch and/or explore their own genitals in both public and private
- » Interest in the anatomical differences between males and females (including nude pictures)
- » Touch genitals/breasts on parents or familiar adults
- » Look when people undress or go to the bathroom
- » Ask about the genitals, breasts, intercourse, and babies
- » Walk around nude
- » Show genitals to other children
- » Play doctor; interested in inspecting other people's bodies
- » Practice adult behaviour and roles by playing parental roles





Model in image and intended as illustrative.

## COMMON BEHAVIOURS AMONG CHILDREN EIGHT TO 12 YEARS OLD



- » Ask questions about genitals, breasts, dating, and reproduction
- » Ask questions about sex
- » Interest in and curiosity with watching/peeking at people getting undressed or going to the bathroom
- » Interest in inspecting other people's bodies in real life
- » Compare genitals with other children (sometimes siblings) that are approximately the same age
- » Show others their genitals, sometimes by playing doctor
- » Need for privacy
- » Touch own genitals (girls not so often) in public
- » Practice adult behaviour and gender related roles
- » Draw genitals on human figures
- » Draw nude pictures
- » Search for nude pictures (what people look like naked) online
- » Explore differences between males and females
- » Girls pretending to be boys
- » Having a boyfriend or girlfriend
- » Consensual holding hands, hugging, kissing with children their own age





## UNCOMMON BEHAVIOURS AMONG CHILDREN 12 YEARS OLD AND UNDER



- » Asking other children to participate in sexual activities
- » Trying to kiss other children or adults with the tongue
- » Having oral contact with other children's genitals
- » Rubbing genitals against other people
- » Rubbing genitals on objects in public
- » Masturbating in public
- » Imitating intercourse with other children
- » Clinging body contact
- » Playing with feces
- » Making sexual sounds or talking in a sexual manner
- » Inserting objects in rectum or vagina
- » Playing sexual games with much younger or older children
- » Sexual curiosity with animals





Models in image and intended as illustrative.

## CONCERNING BEHAVIOURS AMONG CHILDREN 12 YEARS OLD AND UNDER



- » Compulsive sexual behaviours (excessive masturbation or watching pornography online)
- » Forcing, threatening, coercing, or degrading other children in a sexual manner or to participate in sexual play
- » Experiencing anger, distress, or anxiety when participating in playing house, playing doctor, or exploring own or other people's bodies
- » Sexually humiliating self or others
- » Distributing naked or sexually provocative pictures of self or other children
- » Engaging in sexual activity with a sibling
- » Engaging in sexual activities with much younger children
- » Inflicting pain or genital injury to self or others
- » Engaging in sexual behaviour in exchange for something (e.g., affection, items) online and/or offline
- » Engaging in sex and sexual behaviour with animals

# RESPONDING TO UNCOMMON OR CONCERNING CHILD SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

When you discover children are engaging in sexualized behaviour, it is important not to overreact or underreact, shame, or embarrass the child. The adult's reaction can hinder or assist in determining what is going on for the child. In an effort to obtain more information from the child and better understand what is occurring, a nonjudgmental and caring response is critical.

## WHAT TO DO:

- » **Ask questions:** Gently ask about the child's understanding about what they are doing. Such as, "What are you playing? Oh, where did you get this idea? Have you seen this before? Have you played this before? Who did you play it with? How did you feel playing this game? I wonder, how do you know about this? I wonder, how do you know how to do this? I wonder, how do you know how to find these things?" If the child's responses lead you to be concerned, document the child's answers in their own words in case a report needs to be made.
- » **Stay calm:** It is important **NOT** to come across angry or upset. This will shut down the children from sharing. When an adult is worried or nervous, children often interpret this as anger towards them and they worry that the adult is mad at them.
- » **Don't punish:** Calmly stop the behaviour and redirect the child or children to something else.
- » **Teach:** Teach children about safe bodily boundaries and safety rules for touching (Visit [kidsintheknow.ca](http://kidsintheknow.ca) for more information).

## Services Referral

- » If the behaviour is uncommon or concerning, consult with child welfare about possible child protection concerns. If child welfare involvement is necessary, discuss how the caregivers will be informed and any safety planning considerations.
- » If you have no reason to believe there are child protection concerns, nonjudgmentally and supportively discuss the behaviour with the child's caregivers. Discuss how the child may have learned the behaviour and make a plan for reinforcing safe boundaries and supervision around other children.
- » It may also be necessary to encourage the family to consult with a child therapist to determine if more therapeutic supports are needed.



## Early Intervention is Key

Much of child sexual behaviour is common and doesn't require any adult attention. However, when behaviour is uncommon or concerning, early identification and intervention is important. Children communicate through their behaviour, and it is how they tell us about their experiences and what is going on for them. Children who are engaging in problematic sexual behaviour rely on informed and caring adults to intervene and respond protectively.

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