

C'mon All the Kids are Doing it! It has to be Normal... Right?

A Guide for Understanding Sexual Behaviors in Children and How to Respond to Behaviors as a Caregiver

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Sexuality is a Lifelong Process

- Sexual behavior is a normal part of growth that develops with physical, cognitive & emotional behaviors.
 - All humans are sexual beings. Sexuality begins at birth & develops over time.
- Caregivers are responsible for helping children understand & accept their sexuality in each stage it's important to:
 - Know when a child's sexual behavior is normal & when it is not.
 - Know how to respond to unhealthy vs. healthy sexual behaviors & if concern continues/increases, how to contact a child development professional & how to report.
 - Know that children learn through their 5 senses & do so until they feel competent or successful at a skill.
 - Children's attempts at sexual behavior are to master what they have seen or heard
 - This is a developmentally appropriate .





What Children Should Understand and Accept in Terms of Sexuality

- Children should feel good about their entire body.
 - Be able to name all their body parts & processes in simple terms.
 - Know their body & it's functions are healthy & natural.
 - Teach them that both boys & girls are equally special, but know anatomical differences.
 - Avoid shame & remorse about body parts, functions & processes.
- Children must know the difference between private & public actions.
- Teach a child that they can say no to unwelcomed touch.
 - No matter who is the one attempting to touch them, the child must recognize that saying no is okay.





Sexual Exploration: Information Gathering Process

- Children explore voluntarily.
 - Light-hearted & spontaneous exploration is healthy.
 - Often happens in a mutual play relationship.
 - Explore gender roles & behaviors by playing house.
 - Explore own & other bodies by looking & touching by playing doctor (should be limited in type & frequency).
 - Participants should be close in age, size & developmental status.
 - Exploration may cause feelings of embarrassment, it should not cause a child to feel angry, ashamed, fearful or anxious.
- Interest in sex & sexuality is normal but...
 - Should be aspects of the child's life.
 - Should diminish if instructed to stop by an adult.





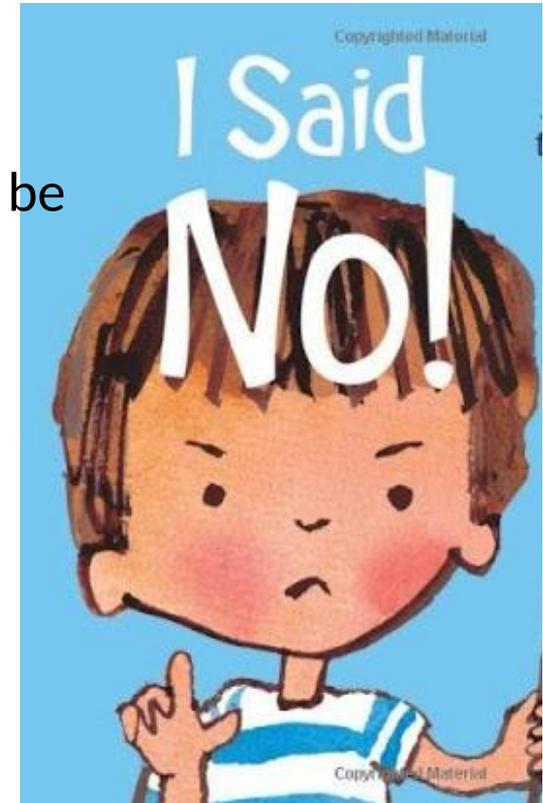
Establish Touching Rules

- **Rules:**

- My body belongs to me!
- No touching (even hugs) if I don't want to be touched.
- No one is allowed to make me share my private parts.
- No one is allowed to share their private parts with me.
- No one is allowed to touch my private parts.

- **Exceptions to rules:**

- Doctor's examination, bathing,...



It is important as a caregiver to talk to children about what to do when someone breaks a touching rule. Remind them that if something or someone gives them the “uh oh” feeling, go to an adult for help!



Responding to Natural Sexual Behaviors

1. Be Calm and Gentle

- Don't punish or yell at the child, it can delay development & cause shame.
- Do not over react or stop the behavior.
 - Set Limits/boundaries & communicate why limits are needed.
 - Move on.

2. Use Open and Direct Communication

- Be clear & direct. State what you saw, listen to their questions, keep it simple.
- Educate them about what is socially appropriate (private vs public).

3. Model Empathy & Accountability

- Point out the impact behaviors can have on self and others.
- Emphasize proper behavior by suggesting other games.
- Offer a clear plan with increasing consequences if necessary.





Natural/Healthy vs. Concerning Behaviors

Natural/Healthy	Concerning
Touches/rubs own genitals during diaper change, going to sleep, when excited, tense or because it feels good (masturbation)	Continues to touch/rub genitals in public after being told “no” constantly
Explore body differences between genders	Keeps asking questions about genital differences after all their questions have been answered
Touches “private parts” of acquainted adults & children with hand or body	Touches/rubs the “private parts” of acquainted adults or children after they have been told not to do so
Takes advantage of an opportunity to look at naked people	Seeks out chances to see naked people even after having seen many people naked
Asks about genitals, breast, intercourse & babies	Asks endless questions and talks about sex with adult slang
Boys: have erections	When erections become frequent
Likes to be naked and sometimes show others their genitals	Wants to be naked in public after parents tell them repeatedly “no”
Curiosity about private parts	Pulling other children’s pants/skirts down against their will



Natural/Healthy	Concerning
Fascinated in observing people doing bathroom functions	Ongoing fascination that may involve following others into bathroom
Children stands/sits too close to familiar adults & children	Child stands/sits too close to unfamiliar adult & children
Uses “dirty” words for bathroom & sexual functions	Uses “dirty” words constantly at home after parent has said “no” & parents do not swear
Interested in own feces	Smears feces on walls or floors more than once
Plays “doctor” inspecting others’ bodies including “private parts”	Repeatedly plays “doctor” & gets caught, after being told “no”
Puts something in own genitals or rectum one time for curiosity or exploration	Puts/tries to put something in genitals or rectum of self or other after being told “no”
Plays house, acts out roles of mommy & daddy	Humping other children with clothes on after being told “no”





Concerning Sexual Behaviors

- Sexual behaviors are concerning when:



1. Behaviors cause distress.

- Interferes with social development (peers avoid).
- Involves sexual activity with other children who don't have mutual play relationships.
- The child is preoccupied with sexuality.
- Includes coercion, threats, bribery or anger.
- Seems grossly out of sync with what other children are doing.

2. Causes physical or emotional pain/discomfort to self or others.

3. Behavior directed at adults.

4. Behavior that progresses in frequency, intensity or intrusiveness over time.

5. Creates fear, anxiety, deep shame, intense guilt.

6. Child is unable to stop.



Now What?

1. Observe



2. Evaluate



3. Respond





Observation

- Practice informed observation by asking “What is the function of this behavior?”
 - Is it a comfort/tension reduction and self-soothing?
 - Is it an attempt to feed intimacy/closeness, when feeling lonely?
 - Is it a reaction to anger/resentment in response to conflict?
 - Is it in response to curiosity and exploration?
 - Is it caused by a need to dominate/control peers?
- What was happening right before behavior started?”

Know that a behavior serves a purpose for the child, often the motivation is not primarily sexual, but serves to help the child cope or gain a sense of control. As caregivers, you can help the child learn to meet these needs in appropriate, healthy ways.





Evaluation: The A-B-C-D of Context

- Affect/Emotion:

- Is this spontaneous, lighthearted play/activity?
- Does the child respond with strong feelings of guilt, aggression, fear, anxiety, etc.?
- Does the child appear numb or dissociate in relation to the sexual activity?



- Behavior:

- Has this behavior occurred before? In the same or different way? How often and in what contexts?
- If the behavior happens with frequency, can they be re-directed?
- What other patterns of behavior (sexual or non-sexual) have you noticed?
- Is the child's sexual development in balance with the rest of his/her development?



The A-B-C-D of Context

- Control:

- Is the interaction mutually understood & wanted activity among peers?
- Is there an imbalance of power between the children?
- Does everyone involved understand what is happening, want to be there & feel free to leave or say no? Is any form of pressure, manipulation, coercion or force being used?

- Development:

- Does the behavior match the child's age & developmental level?
- Do we expect most children in this culture/community to act this way?





Responding to Behaviors

(that pose an immediate risk of harm)

- Stop the behavior
 - Immediately/physically separate.
- Intervene
 - Prevent harm.
- Respond
 - Evaluate nature of the interaction.
 - Make appropriate intervention.
 - Protect others.
- Report
 - Some of these behaviors are illegal.
 - To report suspected child abuse, sexual assault or neglect contact:



- Boulder Country Department of Housing & Human Services at 303-441-1309
- Colorado state toll-free number, report at 1-844-CO-4-KIDS
- Longmont Police Department- Non-emergency at 303-651-8501



Responding to Behaviors

(that are sexual but not immediately harmful/abusive)

1. Describe the behavior:

“when you...”

- Show other kids your private parts...
- Use those words...
- Slap (hit, kick, bite, punch, etc.) the other kids...
- Tell me that...
- Ask to see someone else’s private parts...
- Don’t respect other’s personal space (bubble)...
- Take others’ things’ without asking permission first...
- Keep secrets...
- Don’t follow the (one person in the bathroom at a time) rule...



2. Tell how it makes you feel:

“I...

Am concerned...

Don't like that...

Worry...

Get embarrassed...

Get uncomfortable...

Feel sad...

Feel unhappy...



Because...

...That hurts others.”

...That is a private behavior & this is not a private place.”

...I can't be sure you are safe.”

...You could get into trouble.”

...Other kids may not like that.”

...That could hurt you.”

...Their bodies are private.”

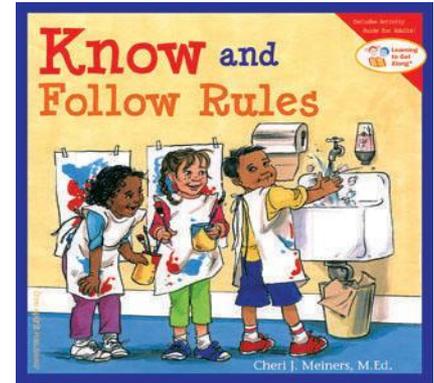
...Their personal property belongs to them.”

...I already told you how I felt about that.”



3. Give a directive (set a limit):

- “You...”
 - Need to stop doing that.”
 - Be specific- i.e. pulling your friend’s pants down.
 - Have to ask permission first.”
 - Are expected to follow the classroom rules.”
 - Can do that in your own bedroom only.”
 - Come & ask me when you have questions about that.”



4. Move on.

5. Monitor for further incidents:

- Identify sources of confusion & misinformation.
- Always foster EMPATHY & RESPONSIBILITY.
- Consistently respond by labeling the behavior, expressing feelings and giving a directive.





More Interventions

- **Foster communication:**



- Label feelings of self & others, talk about wants & needs, give truthful information, correct misinformation, be willing to talk about what the child wants to know, model healthy & open communication.

- **Foster accountability:**



- Consistent limits, expectations & consequences that hold self & others responsible for their own behaviors.
- Model individual responsibility.

- **Foster empathy:**



- Talk about how peers affect us. Help children learn to recognize how behaviors affect others.
- Parents should be aware how their own behaviors affect children.

- **Establish boundaries/limits:**



- Physical, emotional, moral, electronic, spiritual & sexual.
- Consistency is important. Enforce accountability for violating boundaries.
- Model appropriate boundaries.



Get Help & Get Connected



- Blue Sky Bridge is the Child Advocacy Center serving Boulder County. They offer:
 - Assistance with child abuse/sexual assault investigations through child friendly forensic interviews.
 - Child Abuse Prevention Education for children and adults
 - Family support during crisis, investigation & beyond.
 - To ask questions, get advice, or simply talk, call [303-444-1388](tel:303-444-1388) or visit their website www.blueskybridge.org



- Project Pinwheel is:
 - A group of agencies working together to prevent & reduce child sexual assault in our community. Supported by the Longmont Police Department & located in the Longmont safety & Justice Center. www.LongmontPinwheel.org



- Moving to End Sexual Assault provides:
 - Sexual assault prevention, education & counseling. MESA serves teens & adults. They operate a 24 hour bilingual crisis line [303-443-7300](tel:303-443-7300).

Together we can prevent child sexual assault