

Ignore it, Discipline or Report?

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



Setting the Foundation

1. **Sexuality is a lifelong process.** All humans are sexual beings. Sexuality begins at birth & develops over time.
2. **Sexual behavior is a normal part of growth** that develops with physical, cognitive & emotional behaviors.
3. **Caregivers can help children understand their sexuality** and set boundaries around sexual behaviors.
4. **Children need information and guidance.** Accurate, non-shaming, developmentally appropriate information about sex and sexuality is protective against sexual abuse.



Kids Need Adults to Help Them...

1. Embrace Body Autonomy
2. Understand and respect boundaries
3. Build empathy
4. Recognize the “ut-oh” feeling
5. Develop a positive body image
6. Know what to do if they feel unsafe



Why do kids display sexual behaviors?...

- 40% of all child sexual abuse occurs by other children
- One of the most underreported types of abuse
- Children can be
 - Re-enacting not knowing that it's abuse
 - Re-enacting intentionally
 - Lacking awareness/teaching around what IS appropriate
- Can happen where both children agree or non-consensually



Characteristics of Sexual Play

Sexual play is common and typically:

- Voluntary, mutual and spontaneous exploration between peers
- Participants are close in age, size, and development
- Motivated by curiosity
- Is infrequent
- Is balanced by curiosity about other things
- Might create embarrassment but not shame or anger
- Can be easily re-directed



Characteristics of Concerning Sexual Behaviors

Sexual behaviors are concerning when:

1. There is an imbalance of power (age, development, size)
2. Behavior involves coercion, force, threats or bribery
3. Behavior creates fear, anxiety, deep shame, intense guilt
4. The behaviors progress in frequency, intensity or intrusiveness over time
5. Child is unable to stop
6. Behaviors are directed at adults



Range of Behaviors: Birth to 4

Common

- Explores own genitals for self-soothing
- Shows interest in or attempts to explore other people's bodies (house, doctor, "I'll show you mine")
- Asks questions about bodies and reproduction
- Potty talk/humor
- Enjoys being naked

Concerning

- Shows awareness or knowledge of specific sex acts or sexual language (ex. oral or anal sex)
- Initiates or participates in adult-like sexual contact with others
- Forces others to engage in sexual play
- Sexualized play using dolls or toys
- Inserting objects into genital openings
- Does not respond to redirection or is secretive about above behaviors



Range of Behaviors: 5 to 8

Common

- Asks questions and might use sexual words
- Masturbates for pleasure
- Plays games (dare)
- Mimics or uses pretend play to act out relationship or dating behaviors
- Wants privacy
- May seek answers to curiosities via internet

Concerning

- Shows awareness or knowledge of specific sex acts or sexual language (ex. oral or anal sex)
- Initiates or participates in adult-like sexual contact with others
- Forces others to engage in sexual play
- Behaves sexually in public or via technology (phone, web, video game, social media, etc.)



Range of Behaviors: 9 to 12

Common

- Asks questions and talks about bodies, relationships, puberty, menstruation, sex, and gender
- Masturbates in privacy
- May develop new attractions or relationships with peers
- Increased desire for privacy
- Shows interest in interacting virtually with peers via texting, gaming, or social media
- Increased curiosity in nudity of others or sexual material

Concerning

- Has adult-like sexual contact with others
- Forces others to engage in sexual experimentation or sexting
- Frequent masturbation that disrupts daily responsibilities
- Expresses or displays disregard for other's bodies or boundaries
- Accessing pornography
- Behaves sexually in public or via technology



Range of Behaviors: Teens

Common

- Explores relationships, identity, body changes, and sexual decision making
- Masturbates in privacy
- May have first sexual experience or sexual experimentation
- Curiosity in nudity of others and sexual material
- Interacts virtually with peers via texting, gaming, or social media

Concerning

- Sexual interest in younger children
- Forces or coerces others to engage in sex, relationships, sexual experimentation, sexting,
- Excessive masturbation (especially to porn)
- Disregard for other's bodies or boundaries
- Behaves sexually in public



Now What?

1. Observe

2. Evaluate

3. Respond



Step 1- Observe

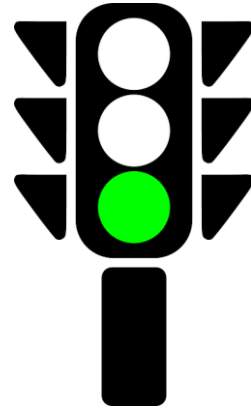
- What is happening?
 - Is it **developmentally expected** or **harmful**?
- Why is it happening?
 - Is it driven by **curiosity, comfort, in response to conflict or the need to control others**?
- How does everyone feel?
 - Are there strong **negative** emotions involved?

*Goal: Determine if the situation suggests a “**Boundaries**” or “**Intervention**” response at first glance

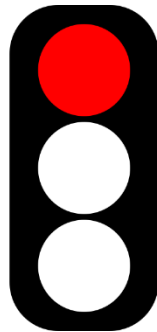


Motivations for Behaviors

- Self soothing
- Curiosity
- Self-regulation (up/down)
- Avoidance/escape from non-preferred activities



- Power/control
- Anger



Step 2- Evaluate

- Helpful in situations where observation is incomplete
- Considers the big picture
- Evaluations are guided by four elements all related to context



Evaluate: As easy as A-B-C-D

Affect/Emotion:

- Is this spontaneous, lighthearted play?
- Does the child display strong feelings of guilt, aggression, fear, anxiety, etc.

Behavior:

- Is this a first time behavior? How often and in what contexts?
- Can they be re-directed?
- Is the child acting out in other ways?
- Is the child's sexual development in balance with the rest of their development?



Step 2 - Evaluate

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?



Step 3- Respond

Respond, don't react

Intervention

or

Boundaries???



Do's & Don'ts

Do

- Be calm and gentle
- Use open and direct communication
- Use it as a chance to reinforce the social norm (private vs public)
- Model empathy and accountability
- Communicate with other adults about what happened and how you handled it

Don't

- Ignore it
- Punish, yell or shame
- Overreact
- Label
- Decrease supervision



Responding to behaviors that require **INTERVENTION**

- **Stop the behavior**
 - Immediately/physically separate
- **Intervene**
 - Prevent further harm
- **Goal**
 - Evaluate nature of the interaction
 - Make appropriate intervention for all kids involved
 - Protect others
- **Report**
 - Some of these behaviors are illegal
 - To report suspected child abuse, sexual assault or neglect contact:
 - Boulder County Department of Housing & Human Services at
303-441-1309
 - Colorado state toll-free number to report at 1-844-CO-3-KIDS



Responding to behaviors that require **Boundaries**

1. Describe the behavior
2. Set a limit
3. Move on



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...



Include 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."



Set a Limit

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



Move on

- “Let’s...
 - Go get ready for swimming
 - Read a book
 - Make lunch
 - Keep practicing soccer
 - Get back to homework



Prevention Tips

Encourage communication:

- Share truthful, non-shaming, developmentally appropriate information about sex, sexuality and bodies
- Correct misinformation
- Be open and available to talk

Practice accountability:

- Set expectations and consequences that hold self/others responsible for their own behaviors.
- Model individual responsibility

Foster empathy:

- Label feelings of self & others
- Ask kids to share their thoughts, fears & experiences

Establish boundaries/limits:

- Physical, emotional, sexual, electronic
- Model appropriate boundaries
- Consistent response to violations



Get Help & Get Connected



- Questions , need advice or support? – Call Blue Sky Bridge
303-444-1388
- Need to make a report? Call 1-844-CO4-KIDS
- Want to go deeper? Take a Nurturing Healthy Sexual Development training from Blue Sky Bridge, or check out resources by clicking the QR code below.

