

Typical and Problematic Sexual Behaviors in Children

Parents, especially those who are caring for children who have been sexually abused, may have many questions about what is normal and developmentally appropriate sexual behavior and what is problematic. Parents frequently don't know when to worry and when to seek professional help. It has been known for some time that children who have been sexually abused often display sexualized behavior. The challenge for parents is knowing which behaviors are developmentally appropriate (common or typical) for a child and which are "red flags" (unhealthy or problematic).

The following charts are guides to typical and problematic sexual behaviors. These are generalizations and not all children will fall exactly into the age ranges listed below. *Parents should immediately discuss any concerns with their child's pediatrician or social worker.*

Typical Sexual Behaviors in Children (Ages 0 – 16)
<p>Preschool (0 to 5 years)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masturbating or touching genitals in public or private • Standing or sitting too close to others • Trying to look at others when they are nude • Looking at and showing private body parts • Using sexual language to talk about body parts, toileting • Trying to touch their mother's or other women's breasts
<p>School Age (6 to 12 years)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masturbating or touching genitals at home or other private places • Trying to look at others when they are nude • "Experimenting" (kissing, fondling, exhibitionism) with same-age children • Beginnings of sexual attraction to and interest in others • Asking questions about physical development, sexual behavior, menstruation, and pregnancy
<p>Adolescence (13 to 16 years)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masturbating in private • Engaging in voyeuristic behaviors • "Experimenting" (kissing, fondling, body rubbing) with same-age children • Becoming sexually active • 33% have had sexual intercourse

Problematic Sexual Behaviors in Children (Ages 0 – 16)

Preschool (0 to 5 years)

- Using sexually explicit language
- Discussing sexual behaviors
- Engaging in adult-like sexual behavior with other children
- Simulating intercourse
- Inserting objects into genital openings

School Age (6 to 12 years)

- Masturbating in a public place
- Discussion of explicit sexual acts
- Behaving sexually in a public place
- Asking peers or adults to participate in explicit sexual acts

Adolescence (13 to 16 years)

- Masturbating in a public place
- Sexual interest in much younger children
- Aggression in touching others' genitals
- Asking adults to participate in explicit sexual acts

References:

The information provided in these tables was adapted in part from: Mayo Clinic's study on Normative Sexual Behavior in Children; the Child Welfare Information Gateway (http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_abused/index.cfm); the NYU Child Study Center; and the American Academy of Pediatrics (<http://www.aap.org>).