

Framework of childhood sexual behaviour and inappropriate sexual behaviours

This is designed as a guide only

This brochure presents a continuum of childhood sexual behaviours observed in people with an intellectual disability.

Three classifications of sexual behaviour have been identified; behaviours typical of healthy development, behaviours which may cause concern and behaviours which require immediate professional intervention. Each behaviour should be observed in context before considering an appropriate response. Bear in mind, some behaviours may not be sexually motivated but are engaged in for a number of other reasons i.e. boredom, sensory stimulation, emotional upset.

There are no set of definite guidelines that determine appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour among individuals. However, the general parameters of age and developmental groupings, by which sexual behaviours are determined to be appropriate or inappropriate, are commonly recognised.

The need for respectful relationships is considered during development. Aggressive and humiliating behaviours are unacceptable and require immediate intervention.

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Childhood Sexual Behaviour Age 0-4 years

A guide for young people with a disability



Sexual behaviour typical of healthy development

Behaviour characteristics

- Curious and information gathering rather than sexual.
- Light hearted and easily distracted.
- Occurs between equals in terms of age, size and cognitive ability.

Typical behaviours may include:

- Wanting to touch or look at the private parts of other children or familiar adults.
- Discussing where babies come from.
- Using 'slang' words for the toilet and/or body parts.
- Stroking, touching or rubbing own genitals.
- Showing others their genitals.
- Playing mummies and daddies (exploring gender roles).
- Enjoying being nude.
- Occurrence of spontaneous erections.

Adult response

The reaction of adults is critical and provides an opportunity to give positive feedback and age appropriate information in a calm manner.

Sexual behaviour causing concern

Behaviour characteristics

- Frequent.
- Excessive in duration.
- Unequal in terms of age, size and cognitive ability.
- Showing signs of preoccupation e.g. unable to carry out usual activities due to behaviour.

Adult response

These behaviours are signs of concern. There is a need to observe and gather information to determine the antecedents and implement an appropriate response i.e. redirection, education and counselling.

Behaviours are persistent and include:

- Showing/touching of own or others' genitals in public after being told not to.
- Following others into the toilet to look at or touch them.
- Wanting to be nude in public.
- Questioning related to genital differences, even after all questions have been answered appropriately.
- Use of explicit sexual language/play beyond their age, indicating possible exposure.
- Touching genitals of others.
- Peeping.
- Imitating sexual behaviour with dolls or stuffed toys.
- Rubbing of own genitals.

Sexual behaviour requiring professional intervention

Behaviour characteristics

- Compulsive.
- Predatory.
- Excessive.
- Coercive.
- Threatening.
- Degrading.
- Illegal.
- Occurs between those with a significant cognitive or age difference.
- Increased preoccupation with the behaviour which precedes **all** other usual activities.

Adult response

Immediate intervention and referral is required to appropriate services.

Behaviours are predatory and include:

- Touching/rubbing of own and/or others' genitals to the exclusion of normal childhood play and activities.
- Attempting to touch the genitals of adults, including strangers.
- Making demands of others to touch or be touched sexually.
- Asking unfamiliar people sexually explicit questions.
- Engaging in sexual conversation with peers.
- Pulling others' pants down against their will.
- Engaging in sexual behaviour with children involving penetration with objects.