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Behaviors Related to Sex and Sexuality
in Preschool Children

The following chart attempts to describe behaviors that relate to sex and sexuality of preschool children of normal intelligence. Available literature and empirical data on child sexuality have been studied and consultation with hundreds of professionals, parents, and childcare providers has been sought to prepare this chart. It is a first step in defining behaviors related to sex and sexuality that are within the normal range, behaviors which raise concern, and behaviors which require immediate assessment and intervention. This chart is not meant for use in the assessment of child sexual abuse. Comments and suggestions are invited by the author.

The behaviors in the *first column* are those which are in the normal range. This range is wide and not all children will engage in all of the behaviors. Some children may engage in none while some may only do one or two. There will be differences due to the child's interest and the amount of exposure the child has had to adult sexuality, nudity, explicit television, videos, and pictures. The child's parent's attitudes and values will influence the child's behaviors.

The *second column* describes behaviors that are seen in some children who are overly concerned about sexuality, children who lack adequate supervision, and other children who have been, or are currently being, sexually molested or maltreated. When a child shows several of these behaviors, a consultation with a professional is advised.

The *third column* describes behaviors which are often indicative of a child who is experiencing deep confusion in the area of sexuality. This child may or may not have been sexually abused or maltreated. It may be that the level of sex and/or aggression in the environment in which the child has lived overwhelmed the child's ability to integrate it and the child is acting out the confusion. Consultation with a professional who specializes in child sexuality or child sexual abuse should be sought.

Sex Play is Within Normal Range of Childhood Behavior

All aspects of normal sex and sexuality for preschool children are related to curiosity and exploration. Preschoolers are trying to find out about the world--how it smells, tastes, works, sounds, and feels. Everything related to the genitals, breasts, differences between males and females, and procreation are subjects of preschoolers' exploration and curiosity. This interest comes and goes.

Areas of Concern

Concern arises when the child focuses on sexuality to a greater extent than 1) other areas of the child's environment or, 2) other developmentally matched peers. Interest in sex and sexuality should be in balance with the curiosity and exploration of all other aspects of the child's life. When a child is admonished about certain sexual behaviors yet continues, this raises concern. Concern also arises when a child does not seem to understand that the overt display of sexual behaviors is uncommon.

If a child shows several behaviors that are of concern, professional advice is recommended.

When to Seek Professional Help

When there is secrecy, anger, anxiety, tension, fear, coercion, force, or compulsive interest and activity related to sex and sexuality, professional advice should be sought.

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Behaviors Related to Sex and Sexuality in Preschool Children

Normal Range	Of Concern	Seek Professional Help
Touches/rubs own genitals when diapers are being changed, when going to sleep, when tense, excited or afraid.	Continues to touch/rub genitals in public after being told many times not to do this.	Touches/rubs self in public or in private to the exclusion of normal childhood activities.
Explores differences between males and females, boys and girls.	Continuous questions about genital differences after all questions have been answered.	Plays male or female roles in an angry, sad, or aggressive manner. Hates own/other sex.
Touches the genitals, breasts of familiar adults and children.	Touches the genitals, breasts of adults not in family. Asks to be touched himself/herself.	Sneakily touches adults. Makes others allow touching, demands touching of self.
Takes advantage of opportunity to look at nude persons.	Stares at nude persons even after having seen many persons nude.	Asks people to take off their clothes. Tries to forcibly undress people.
Asks about the genitals, breasts, intercourse, and babies.	Keeps asking people even after parent has answered questions at age-appropriate level.	Asks strangers after parent has answered. Sexual knowledge too great for age.
Erections.	Continuous erections.	Painful erections.
Likes to be nude. May show others his/her genitals.	Wants to be nude in public after the parent says “no”.	Refuses to put on clothes. Secretly shows self in public after many scoldings.
Interested in watching people doing bathroom functions.	Interest in watching bathroom functions does not wane in days/weeks.	Refuses to leave people alone in bathroom, forces way into bathroom.
Interested in having/birthing a baby.	Boy’s interest does not wane after several days/weeks of play about babies.	Displays fear or anger about babies, birthing, or intercourse.
Uses “dirty” words for bathroom and sexual functions.	Continues to use “dirty” words at home after parent says “no”.	Uses “dirty” words in public and at home after many scoldings.
Interested in own feces.	Smears feces on walls or floor more than one time.	Repeatedly plays or smears feces after scolding.
Plays doctor, inspecting others’ bodies.	Frequently plays doctor after being told “no”.	Forces child to play doctor, to take off clothes.

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Behaviors Related to Sex and Sexuality in Preschool Children (continued)

Normal Range	Of Concern	Seek Professional Help
Puts something in the genitals or rectum of self or other due to curiosity or exploration.	Puts something in genitals or rectum of self or other child after being told “no.”	Any coercion or force in putting something in genitals or rectum of other child.
Plays house, act out roles of mommy and daddy.	Humping other children with clothes on.	Simulated or real intercourse without clothes, oral sex.

Behaviors Related to Sex and Sexuality in Young School-Age Children

Normal Range	Of Concern	Seek Professional Help
Asks about the genitals, breasts, intercourse, babies.	Shows fear or anxiety about sexual topics.	Endless questions about sex. Sexual knowledge too great for age.
Interested in watching/peeking at people doing bathroom functions.	Keeps getting caught watching/peeking at others doing bathroom functions.	Refuses to leave people alone in bathroom.
Uses “dirty” words for bathroom functions, genitals, and sex.	Continues to use “dirty” words with adults after parent says “no” and punishes.	Continues use of “dirty” words even after exclusion from school and activities.
Plays doctor, inspecting others’ bodies.	Frequently plays doctor and gets caught after being told “no”.	Forces child to play doctor, to take off clothes.
Boys and girls are interested in having/birthing a baby.	Boy keeps making believe he is having a baby after month/s.	Displays fear or anger about babies or intercourse.
Show others his/her genitals.	Wants to be nude in public after the parent says “no” and punishes the child.	Refuses to put on clothes. Exposes self in public after many scoldings.
Interest in urination and defecation.	Plays with feces. Purposely urinates on floor.	Repeatedly plays or smears feces. Urinates on furniture on purpose.
Touches/rubs own genitals when going to sleep, when tense, excited, or afraid.	Continues to touch/rub genitals in public after being told “no”. Masturbates on furniture or with objects.	Touches/rubs self in public or in private to the exclusion of normal childhood activities. Masturbates on people.
Plays house, may simulate all roles of mommy and daddy.	Humping other children with clothes on. Imitates sexual behavior with dolls/stuffed toy.	Humping naked. Intercourse with another child. Forcing sex on another child.

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Behaviors Related to Sex and Sexuality in Young School-Age Children (continued)

Normal Range	Of Concern	Seek Professional Help
Thinks other sex children are “gross” or have “cooties.” Chases them.	Uses “dirty” language when other children <i>really</i> complain.	Uses bad language against other child’s family. Hurts other sex children.
Talks about sex with friends. Talks about having a girl/boy friend.	Sex talk gets child in trouble. Gets upset with public displays of affection.	Talks about sex and sexual acts a lot. Repeatedly in trouble in regard to sexual behavior.
Wants privacy when in bathroom or changing clothes.	Becomes very upset when seen changing clothes.	Aggressive or tearful in demand for privacy.
Likes to hear and tell “dirty” jokes.	Keeps getting caught telling “dirty” jokes. Makes sexual sounds, e.g., moans.	Still tells “dirty” jokes even after exclusion from school and activities.
Looks at nude pictures.	Continuous fascination with nude pictures.	Wants to masturbate to nude pictures or display them.
Plays games with same-aged children related to sex and sexuality.	Wants to play games with much younger children related to sex and sexuality.	Forces others to play games related to sex and sexuality. Group forces child/ren to play.
Draws genitals on human figures.	Draws genitals on one figure and not another. Genitals in disproportionate size to body.	Genitals stand out as most prominent feature. Drawings of intercourse, group sex.
Explores differences between males and females, boys and girls.	Confused about male/female differences after all questions have been answered.	Plays male or female roles in a sad, angry, or aggressive manner. Hates own/other sex.
Takes advantage of opportunity to look at nude child or adult.	Stares/sneaks to stare at nude persons even after having seen many persons nude.	Asks people to take off their clothes. Tries to forcibly undress people.
Pretends to be opposite sex.	Wants to be opposite sex.	Hates being own sex. Hates own genitals.
Wants to compare genitals with peer-aged friends.	Wants to compare genitals with much older or much younger children or adults.	Demands to see the genitals, breasts, buttocks of children or adults.
Wants to touch genitals, breasts, buttocks of other same-aged child or have child touch him/her.	Continuously wants to touch genitals, breasts, buttocks of other children. Tries to engage in oral, anal, vaginal sex.	Manipulates or forces other child to allow touching of genitals, breasts, buttocks. Forced or mutual oral, anal, or vaginal sex.

Behaviors Related to Sex and Sexuality in Young School-Age Children (continued)

Normal Range	Of Concern	Seek Professional Help
Kissing familiar adults and children. Allowing kissing by familiar adults and children.	French kissing. Talks in sexualized manner with others. Fearful of hugs and kisses by adults. Gets upset with public displays of affection.	Overly familiar with strangers. Talks in a sexualized manner with unknown adults.
Looks at the genitals, buttocks, breasts of adults.	Touches/stares at the genitals, breasts, buttocks of adults. Asks adult to touch him, her on genitals.	Sneakily or forcibly touches genitals, breasts, buttocks of adults. Tries to manipulate adult into touching him/her.
Erections.	Continuous erections.	Painful erections.
Puts something in own genitals/rectum.	Puts something in own genitals/rectum when it feels uncomfortable. Puts something in the genitals, rectum of other child.	Any coercion or force in putting something in genitals/rectum of other child. Anal, vaginal intercourse. Causing harm to own genitals/rectum.
Interest in breeding behavior of animals.	Touching genitals of animals.	Sexual behaviors with animals.

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When Children's Sexual Behaviors Raise Concern

--Signals for Parents and Counselors--

1. The child focuses on sexuality to a greater extent than on other aspects of his/her environment, and/or has more sexual knowledge than similar-aged children with similar backgrounds who live in the same area. A child's sexual interests should be in balance with his/her curiosity about, and exploration of other aspects of his/her life.
2. The child has an ongoing compulsive interest in sexual, or sexually-related activities, and/or is more interested in engaging in sexual behaviors than in playing with friends, going to school, and doing other developmentally-appropriate activities.
3. The child engages in sexual behaviors with those who are much older or younger. Most school-aged children engage in sexual behaviors with children within a year or so of their age. In general, the wider the age range between children engaging in sexual behaviors, the greater the concern.
4. The child continues to ask unfamiliar children, or children who are uninterested, to engage in sexual activities. Healthy and natural sexual play usually occurs between friends and playmates.
5. The child, or a group of children, bribes or emotionally and/or physically forces another child/children of any age into sexual behaviors.
6. The child exhibits confusion or distorted ideas about the rights of others in regard to sexual behaviors. The child may contend: "She wanted it" or "I can touch him if I want to."
7. The child tries to manipulate children or adults into touching his/her genitals or causes physical harm to his/her own or other's genitals.
8. Other children repeatedly complain about the child's sexual behaviors--especially when the child has already been spoken to by an adult.
9. The child continues to behave in sexual ways in front of adults who say "no," or the child does not seem to comprehend admonitions to curtail overt sexual behaviors in public places.

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10. The child appears anxious, tense, angry, or fearful when sexual topics arise in his/her everyday life.
11. The child manifests a number of disturbing toileting behaviors: s/he plays with or smears feces, urinates outside of the bathroom, uses excessive amounts of toilet paper, stuffs toilet bowls to overflow, sniffs or steals underwear.
12. The child's drawings depict genitals as the predominant feature.
13. The child manually stimulates or has oral or genital contact with animals.
14. The child has painful and/or continuous erections or vaginal discharge.

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