

Characteristics of Child Sexual Behaviors: A Continuum

Adapted from Sexualized Children: Elaina Gil
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Normal Sexual Exploration

Description of the Behavior

- Child looks at and touches his/her own genitals and other children's genitals; child exposes his/her genitals to other children.

Distinguishing Characteristics

- The behavior is mutual between children of similar age and size.
- The behavior is easily redirected; children stop the behavior when told to do so.

Purpose of the Behavior

- To find out about same and opposite gender body parts.

Sexually Reactive

Description of the Behavior

- Self-stimulation: touching, manipulations of genitalia, may engage other children in re-enactments of sexual activity, insertion of fingers into genitalia, oral sex.

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Child has usually been sexually abused or exposed to sexually stimulating experiences.
- Child feels deep shame, guilt, and pervasive anxiety regarding sexuality.
- Behavior is not aggressive or hostile, not meant to demean another child.
- Do not seek out other children to coerce or victimize, do not threaten other children.
- Behavior usually occurs shortly after the sexual abuse or sexually stimulating experience, and then decreases.
- Child usually acknowledges the need to stop behaviors and welcomes help to do so; sexual behavior is relatively easy to stop with treatment.

Purpose for the Behavior

- To resolve confusion and anxiety regarding his/her experiences by re-enacting those experiences.

Extensive Mutual Sexual Behaviors

Description of the Behavior

- Full spectrum of adult sexual behavior (i.e., oral sex, vagina and anal intercourse), generally with children in same age and size range.
- Child's thoughts and behaviors are pervaded with sexuality.

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Child has usually been sexually abused; often the home life has been chaotic, dangerous, and unfriendly.
- Uses influence and persuasion to engage other children of approximately the same age range.
- Child often engages in self-mutilation.
- Sexual behavior cannot be redirected; intense treatment is needed to correct the behavior.
- Blasé, matter-of-fact attitude toward sexual behaviors with other children.

Purpose of the Behavior

- To act out aggression and violence that was perpetrated upon him/her.
- To use power to control another child.
- May or may not engage in sex to satisfy sexual stimulation.
- To gain or avoid emotional intimacy and closeness.
- To shock adults or other children.
- Uses sex as a means of relating to peers; as a human connection.

Children Who Molest

Description of the Behavior

- Wide range of sexual behavior: genital manipulation, intercourse, rape, anal penetration, and forcible penetration of objects into genitalia and/or anus.
- Sexual behavior is impulsive, compulsive, and aggressive.

Distinguishing Characteristics of the Behavior

- The child perpetrator meets his/her own needs at the victim's expense.
- Force or coercion is used; perpetrator seeks out children who are vulnerable or easy to molest, and/or use social/emotional threats to keep victim quiet.
- There is usually a significant age and/or size difference between the perpetrator and the victim.
- The sexual behavior continues and increases over time and is part of a consistent pattern.
- The perpetrator seldom has empathy for the victim; denies responsibility for sexual offending.
- History of deviant sexual experiences including: being a victim of sexual abuse and/or sexualized violence, and being the object of pornographic photography; physical and emotional abuse; home was usually sexually over-stimulating.
- These children usually have behavior problems at home and school, are often physically aggressive, lack problem-solving skills, have little impulse control; often have disturbed toileting patterns.
- The child perpetrator requires extensive specialized treatment to extinguish the perpetrating behavior.

Purpose of the Behavior

- Sexual acting out is linked to feelings of anger, rage, loneliness, fear, and confusion.
- Sex is paired with aggression.
- To relieve feelings of anxiety, fear, confusion, associated with sex (this relief is short lived, and is often followed by increased anxiety.)