

## When Children Act Out Sexually

*The most  
important thing  
we can say  
to children, is*



*"Talk about it."*

A Guide For Parents And Teachers

**This booklet answers these questions:**

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## Why is it hard to recognize the problem?

There are few problems as difficult for parents, teachers, and day-care staff as deciding how to deal with children in their care who are imposing sexual activity on other children. There are many questions to consider. Should you simply ignore the behavior and hope the child will 'grow out of it'? Or should you attempt to correct the behavior, and run the risk of making the child feel guilty about normal sexual curiosity?

How do you deal with your own discomfort in addressing the problem? Many adults in charge of young children come from homes where sex was never discussed. In today's society there is a great emphasis on sex, so we may assume that our children are sexually sophisticated. We may risk viewing children's sexual behavior and language as a sign of the times, and do nothing about it. Or we may envy their supposed 'openness', and compare it unfavourably with our own 'repressed' childhoods.



Children today do have access to more information about sex, but it is also true that they are exposed to more misinformation. They also experience a lot of sexual

pressure from the media and from society as a whole. To help children in trouble, we must base our decisions on what we know as fact, not what we imagine to be true.

*All children are different  
and develop at different rates.*

To know whether a child is being sexually aggressive or simply curious, we need to understand children's normal sexual development. There is a world of difference, for example, between two children in a daycare pulling their pants down to look at one another's genitals and a child forcing a pencil into another child's anus.

## **What is normal sexual development?**

Unless children are interfered with, their sexual development follows a natural sequence regardless of what society may think about sex at any given time. Children are born sexual. Boys are often born with erect penises and girls with lubricated vaginas.

**After birth some of the following changes may take place at approximately the following ages:**

**2½ Years:** Children begin to notice that boys and girls assume different postures to urinate. They may attempt to copy one another's postures. They begin to show interest in physical differences.

**4 Years:** Children may play games of 'show'. They may use 'bathroom' talk, and call one another names like 'Poophead'. When you take them to visit friends, they may show an interest in unfamiliar bathrooms. They may role-play activities they associate with Mommy and Daddy.

**5 Years:** Children become more modest and will demand greater privacy.

**6 Years:** Children begin to demand practical answers about the differences in the sexes. They may want to know where babies come from and how they are made. Parents should give children short concrete explanations which don't tax their ability to listen. Children also become curious about death at this age.

**7 Years:** There is generally less interest in sexual matters.

**8 Years:** Renewed interest in sex takes the form of smutty jokes, sexual rhymes, provocative giggling and whispering. Grade 3 teachers may find themselves flooded with 'John loves Mary' notes.

**9 Years:** Children begin to exchange sex information with friends of the same sex. They may look in books for information about their sexual organs and how they function.

**10 Years:** Some girls and a few boys will have reached puberty by age 10. Children show greater interest in the opposite sex. There is considerable interest in smutty jokes, which will be a little more sophisticated than the jokes they told when they were 8.

Don't be alarmed if children appear to skip some of these stages. All children are different and they all develop at different rates. The stages listed here are *generally* true, and are simply intended as guidelines to help you make an initial judgment about whether a specific child's behavior is 'normal' or not.

## How is normal sexual development disrupted?

It can be disrupted by the unwanted and forceful sexual attention of adults, older children or aggressive children their own age.

**Forceful sexual attention may take several forms, such as:**

① Continued exposure to pornographic videotapes or magazines. Pornographic material is most harmful to children if they are forced to watch it. However, it may also be harmful if it is left around the house in places where children can't miss it.

② Sexual behavior in front of children. If children are forced to watch their baby-sitter having sex with a visiting friend, for example, it can be a harmful experience. But parents shouldn't worry if a child inadvertently walks in on their love-making. The difference is that the child is not forced to watch, and the activity can be explained in a way that reassures the child.

*The most important thing*

③ Disrespectful sexual attitudes and frequent use of sexual language and innuendo may encourage children to be forceful and insensitive of others.

*we can say to children, is*

④ Caregivers' failure to respect privacy or body boundaries. This can cause children to grow up unaware that others need privacy and have boundaries.

*" talk about it. "*

⑤ Direct sexual abuse. When children suffer from direct sexual abuse, they are most likely to suffer from developmental disruption. This happens because sexual abuse forces children to experience sexual activity when they are not physically or psychologically ready.

## Are there signs a child may have been abused?

**Yes. When children have been sexually abused or subjected to unwanted sexual attention, they may change their behavior in a number of ways:**

① They may exhibit passive behaviors such as night fears, fear of school changing rooms, depression, school failure and withdrawal from friends and activities.

② They may exhibit aggressive behaviors such as fighting, being cruel to pets, setting fires, and acting out sexually against other children.

## **Why do abused children act out sexually?**

Although there is plenty of evidence that sexually abused children frequently act out against other children, the reason they do so isn't always clear. Common sense suggests that abused children would try to avoid repeating a frightening and distasteful activity. Unfortunately 'common sense' can easily fool us.

In many cases molested children repeat the activity in which they were victims, trying to make sense of what happened. For example, a boy may have been forced to perform oral sex on an older boy. The activity may have made him feel frightened, confused and sexually excited all at the same time. Repeating the activity with a younger boy as victim takes him out of the victim role and into a new role where he is in charge. He is now less frightened and less anxious, and better understands why the older boy wanted oral sex performed on him.

When children repeat an experience in which they were victim, it is called a 'repetition compulsion'. We know how this compulsion works when we see the child of an alcoholic growing up either to marry an alcoholic or to become one. Boys who have been molested frequently repeat the abuse as offenders, while girls frequently repeat the abuse as victims.

Boys are often ashamed to admit they have been victims, so molesting another child may be a way of calling out for help. Sometimes boys will admit that they have molested another child before they will admit to being victims themselves.

Girls do not assume the role of sexual aggressor as often as boys. Research shows that those who do usually have a background of lengthy and extreme abuse.

The 'repetition compulsion' is not inevitable. It is only one of the ways in which children try to adapt to being molested. As a general rule, the more comfortable children feel about reporting a molestation, the less likely they are to act out sexually. In families where boys are expected to be stoic and self-sufficient, acting-out behaviour is much more likely.

When we don't allow boys to admit to feeling powerless or helpless, we often create situations in which the only feelings allowed are anger and aggression.

The most important thing we can say to children, and boys in particular is, "Talk about it."

## How should you respond to children who molest other children?

Children who molest should always be viewed with compassion. If their behavior is repulsive to us, we may recoil and scapegoat them by calling them 'offenders' or 'young Jezebels'. These children need help just as much as their victims, and you should report them to social services or to the police.

" I'm glad he told  
because he seemed really

Often, when they are questioned, they will admit they themselves have been abused by a teenage or adult offender. Social service workers must protect children who molest as well as their victims, because they are still vulnerable to abuse by older offenders.

unhappy and we  
couldn't figure out why.

If children who molest are 12 years or older, they may be charged under the Young Offenders Act. The judge may take into account their youth and place them on probation with compulsory counselling if they are convicted.

Now that we know  
we can help him , "

The judge will often rely on the experience and testimony of social workers and police to distinguish between children who have just started to offend and older teenagers who are habitually violent. The latter can be just as dangerous as adult offenders.

## **Do children who act out sexually harm themselves?**

**Yes.** Children who act out sexually, and are not stopped, hurt not only other children, but may also harm themselves. Because they relate to other children in a sexual way, they may deprive themselves of a chance to have real friendships. When children have a guilty secret, it is impossible for them to be open with others.

Unless someone intervenes to break the secrecy, the child who molests other children runs the risk of becoming sexually addicted. A sense of power over others, plus sexual excitement, can be extremely rewarding, particularly since it compensates for poor self-esteem. The longer the sexual activities continue, the more addictive they become. If they continue into adolescence they are difficult to stop.

## **How can you help the child who molests other children?**

You can help by intervening early when you first suspect abuse. Since sexual abuse of any kind thrives on secrecy, breaking secrecy is the first step towards helping everyone involved. Children who molest must be interviewed by social services or police for two reasons: to help them admit to what they have done, and to provide clues as to why they are doing it. Once they admit to molesting, they are much less likely to continue. As long as they deny what they are doing, and deny their own probable victimization, they are much more likely to continue molesting.



*Children who molest should always be viewed with compassion.*



**Once the secrecy is broken there are many ways in which parents, teachers and other responsible adults can help:**

**As a parent, you can help in several different ways:**

① You must believe the victim's story. There is always a temptation to believe that your own child can do no wrong.

② You can make your own child accountable by asking him/her to say exactly what has happened.

③ You should watch your own children's play, and monitor their TV watching. If you own a VCR, you should be aware of the videotapes that come into your home.



④ If you have been lax about respecting family privacy needs, you may need to set some new rules about such things as nudity, closed doors and sexual activity.

⑤ You must maintain affection and support for your child. The sexually acting-out child already has low self-esteem, and is going through a life crisis. The child needs plenty of love, providing it isn't sexualized.

⑥ If the social workers or police recommend counselling for the child, it is important for you to comply. Parents sometimes believe that if they simply scold the child or withdraw privileges, the problem will be solved. They often believe that a problem will go away of its own accord if it isn't discussed. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

⑦ You can work with your child's counsellor as much as possible to help your child change his/her behavior. This is

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even more important than thinking about *why* your child has been molesting.

**As a teacher**, you can help by observing children's behavior both in the classroom and on the playground. If there is sexual language, genital-grabbing, or other anti-social behavior, you must confront and stop it. Your discomfort may tempt you to either ignore it or react too harshly. Treat it matter-of-factly like hitting, cheating, swearing or any other socially unacceptable behavior.

**Schools** can help by using sexual abuse prevention programs. School programs have already encouraged thousands of children to disclose incidents of sexual abuse. Teachers presenting these programs should point out that it isn't just strangers in cars who molest children. It may be family members and it may even be other children.

**Police** can help by warning children of the consequences of their activities if they are carried into adolescence or adulthood.

**Social workers** can help parents identify patterns of family behavior that contribute to the molesting; for example, having pornographic material readily available to the children at home. They can also help by referring children to counsellors who specialize in sexual abuse cases.

**Sexual abuse counsellors** can help children understand the causes of their molesting behavior, and learn how to control it.

If you're the parent of a child who has molested another child, you should get professional help either from your child's sexual abuse counsellor, or from a counsellor of your own.

## **What is secondary abuse?**

A teenager or adult may molest a child who then begins to molest other children. There may then be a ripple effect, with the molested children initiating still more children into sexual activity. When this happens in a school or neighborhood, it may seem hopeless at first glance. *But it isn't.*

### **Here is what you must do:**

① Find the original source of the abuse. For example, locate the child who was molested by the adult and deal with the victim's trauma.

② Identify the secondary victims; that is, the victims of the first victim. Notify social services, police, and sexual abuse counsellors who will address their needs. The secondary victims may need only short-term counselling if they haven't gone through as much trauma as the original victim.

## **How does all this work?**

Here's a case study to illustrate the point: A teenage sex offender leaves pornographic magazines at strategic locations on a path behind an elementary school. When he spots a potential victim reading a magazine, he comes up and asks him if he would like to know what real sex feels like.

If the potential victim is insecure, lonely, and happy to get some attention, he may say 'yes'. The offender performs oral sex on him. The offender then goes on to molest 2 or 3 other boys in the same manner. He may be able to convince his victims that they are now part of a club, and are sharing in a daring anti-social activity.

At this point peer pressure takes over, and the 'oral sex club' is operating with or without its founder. Deep down all of the members are ashamed of what they're doing, but male bravado forces them to pretend they're enjoying themselves. They don't try to back out because of peer pressure.

Eventually a neighbor spots the club in action and phones the police, who quickly identify all the members. One of the officers talks to the boys about respecting their own bodies and other people's. "If it's not yours, don't touch it," the officer tells them, thus reinforcing the basic message in the school prevention program.

The officer then informs social services. A social worker visits each home and informs the parents. The boys may be referred to a sexual abuse counsellor who helps them find the right words to describe their feelings.

The social worker then phones the school principal who advises her teachers to include examples of this nature, but not the specific case, in the sexual abuse prevention program.

The 'oral sex club' goes out of existence, and the boys are able to get back to the business of being normal children.

The police interview the sex offender and charges may be laid.

### **How can parents deal with their own feelings?**

Finding out that your own child has molested another child may be one of the most difficult life experiences you'll ever have to face. Most parents go into shock initially, then through a period of denial where they try to pretend that nothing has happened. For a while they might feel as though they're on a roller-coaster ride of unfamiliar and conflicting emotions.

**Here are some common reactions:**

**There's been a mistake.** My child would never have done such a thing.

**It's not our fault.** There's too much talk about sex these days. Look at the TV commercials. It's a wonder they don't all grow up to be perverts.

**I'm so ashamed.** Where did we go wrong?

**They'll lock him up** with hardened criminals and he'll come out even worse.

**I'll go crazy and kill him.**

**We don't need any help.** We've always handled our own problems as a family. If we can all pull together, we can put this behind us in no time.

**I feel so helpless.** Everyone else is 'calling the shots' now.

*A skilled counsellor can help you express your feelings.*

If you're a parent whose child has molested another child, it's quite normal to go through all of these reactions, often within a short space of time. You should get professional help, either from your child's sexual abuse counsellor, or from a counsellor of your own. The crisis may also trigger memories of sexual abuse incidents from your own childhood which you've tried to forget.

## What will your child's counsellor do?

Your child's counsellor should be a specialist in child sexual abuse with a good knowledge of both victim and offender behaviour.

### The counsellor will help your child do three important things:

- ① Deal with both the molesting behaviour and a possible background of sexual abuse underlying the behaviour.
- ② Help change the faulty attitudes and weak self-esteem at the root of the sexual acting-out.
- ③ Develop healthy sexual attitudes.



With your help the crisis can become an opportunity for change and growth.

Children develop sexually at their own rate and in their own way provided their development is not disrupted. Both parents and teachers have a critical role to play in identifying and helping children who are molesting other children. Your worst fear may be that the molesting child will grow up to be an adult sex offender. It doesn't have to turn out that way. The more that counsellors can help children talk about their behaviour, the more likely they are to stop.

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