

Twenty Characteristics of Problematic Sexual Behavior in Children

1. **The children engaged in the sexual behaviors do not have an ongoing mutual play relationship.** Sexual play between children is an extension of regular play behavior. Just as children prefer to play with children with whom they get along, the same is true with sexual play. As most children are very aware of taboos on sexual play in the open, they pick friends who will keep a secret.
2. **Sexual behaviors are engaged in by children of different ages or developmental levels.** Unless there are no similar-age children in the neighborhood, most children select play-mates of the same age. Developmentally delayed children may choose to play with younger children because their developmental level is more similar. Children with poor social skills may also play with younger children. It is important to assess the availability of peer-age friends, the child's developmental level and the previous relationship between the children to determine if sexual behaviors between children of different ages are problematic. In general, the wider the age difference, the greater the concern.
3. **Sexual behaviors are out of balance with other aspects of the child's life and interests.** Children are interested in every aspect of their environment from the sun rising to how babies are made. While children may explore some aspects of their world more extensively at certain periods of their young lives, their interests are generally broad and intermittent. Children's sexual behavior follows the same pattern. At one period they may be very interested in learning about sexuality and another time about how the dishwasher works or what will make mommy and daddy mad. Many fluctuations occur in a day, a week and a month. When a child is preoccupied with sexuality, this raises concern. If a child would prefer to masturbate rather than engage in regular childhood activities, this raises concern.
4. **Children who seem to have too much knowledge about sexuality and behave in ways more consistent with adult sexual expression.** As children develop, they acquire knowledge about sex and sexuality from television, movies, videos, magazines, their parents, siblings, relatives, school and other children. This knowledge is generally assimilated, without disruption, into the child's developing understanding of sex and sexuality; this translates into additional natural and healthy sexual interest. When children have been overexposed to explicit adult sexuality, pornography, environments with poor boundaries, or sexual abuse, they may engage in or talk about sexual behaviors that are beyond age-appropriate sexual knowledge and interest.
5. **Sexual behaviors are significantly different than those of other same-age children.** The frequency and type of children's sexual behaviors depend, to a certain extent, on the environment (home, neighborhood, culture, religion) in which they have been raised, their parents' and siblings' attitudes and actions related to sex and sexuality, and their peers' behaviors. If a child's sexual behavior stands out among his or her peers, this raises concern. Teachers from schools that serve neighborhood populations are very good resources to consult in evaluating whether a child's sexual behaviors are similar to his or her peers.
6. **Sexual behaviors continue in spite of consistent and clear requests to stop.** While adults may be inconsistent regarding other behaviors and children may persist in engaging in them, children generally learn very quickly that there is a strong taboo on openly engaging in sexual behavior. While most adults are consistent about telling children to stop sexual behaviors, some are not. Inconsistent messages regarding sexual behavior may sustain or increase a child's sexual behaviors.

Children's sexual behaviors that continue in the view of adults, despite consistent requests to stop or even punishment, may be a conscious or unconscious method of indicating that they need help. When children "cry for help" they may persist in the behavior until adults pay heed, discover, and/or change the causes of the sexual behavior.

Some children have learned to dissociate during times of stress. While they are "spaced out" they may engage in sexual behavior that is an attempt to decrease their anxiety. If this is happening, the child

may be unaware of what he or she is doing. Because the child's response to stress is to "space out" and engage in sexual behaviors, it may happen in spite of consistent requests to stop.

- 7. Children appear unable to stop themselves from engaging in sexual activities.** Some children appear driven to engage in sexual behaviors, even though they will be punished or admonished. Generally, this type of sexual behavior is in response to things that go on around them or feelings which reawaken memories that are traumatic, painful, overly stimulating or of which they can't make sense. The child may respond by masturbating or engaging in other sexual behaviors alone or with children or adults. Hiding the sexual behaviors or finding friends to engage in the behaviors in private may not be possible for these children. Sexual behavior that is driven by anxiety, guilt or fear often does not respond to normal limit setting. The sexual behavior is a way of coping with overwhelming feelings. This type of sexual behavior may not be within the full conscious control of the child.

While not yet known, it may be that some children who engage in more compulsive sexual behaviors have an excess of sex hormones, stress-related neurobiological or neurochemical changes in their brains, or physiological differences which drive this behavior.

- 8. Children's sexual behaviors elicit complaints from other children and/or adversely affect other children.** Generally, children complain when something is annoying or discomforting to them. When a young child complains about another child's sexual behaviors, it is an indication that the behavior is upsetting to the child and should be taken seriously. In natural and healthy sexual play both children agree, directly or indirectly, not to tell and engage in it willingly. It is quite unlikely that either would tell on the other; therefore, if one child is telling, this is a cause for concern.

Alternatively, on elementary school playgrounds, boys and girls run after one another discovering who has the most "cooties". When the children are equal in age, developmental status and are having fun together, these complaints are generally a spirited age-appropriate interchange that need only be monitored to see that it remains fun and non-coercive.

- 9. Children's sexual behaviors are directed at adults who feel uncomfortable receiving them.** Children hug adults and give them kisses. These are generally spontaneous reflections of caring or because they have been told to kiss the adult (usually a relative) by a parent. When a child continues to touch an adult in a manner more like adult-adult sexual contact, offer themselves as sexual objects, or solicit sexual touch from adults, this raises concern.
- 10. Children (4 years and older) do not understand their rights or the rights of others in relation to sexual contact.** Most parents teach their children by their own behavior about emotional, physical and sexual privacy. Generally, school-age children have developed an awareness of their own and others' personal space. If children are brought up in homes where their personal boundaries are violated, such as in emotional, sexual and/or physical abuse or intrusiveness, they may not learn the unwritten rules regarding personal space.
- 11. Sexual behaviors progress in frequency, intensity or intrusiveness over time.** While sexual behavior in children is natural and healthy, the frequency is generally moderate, sporadic, and generally occurs outside the vision and knowledge of others. Since by elementary school, children increasingly hide their sexual behaviors from adults, if a child's sexual behaviors invade others' emotional and physical space, are increasing, and are known to adults, this raises concern.
- 12. Fear, anxiety, deep shame or intense guilt is associated with the sexual behaviors.** Children's feelings regarding sexuality are generally light-hearted, spontaneous, giggly or silly. In some cases, if a child has been caught engaging in sexual behaviors, the adult's response may generate embarrassed or guilty feelings in the child. Yet, these feelings are qualitatively different than the deep shame, intense guilt, fear or anxiety of a child who has been fooled, coerced, bribed or threatened into sexual

behaviors or overexposed to adult sexuality, particularly sexuality paired with aggressive feelings or actions.

13. **Children engage in extensive, persistent mutually agreed upon adult-type sexual behaviors with other children.** Children generally engage in a variety of spontaneous and sporadic sexual behaviors with other children for purposes of exploration and the satisfaction of curiosity. Some children who feel alone in the world may turn to other children to decrease their loneliness. These children often do not see adults as sources of emotional warmth and caring. If the children have been prematurely sexualized and/or taught that sex equals caring, they may try to use sex as a way to cope with their loneliness and feelings of abandonment.
14. **Children manually stimulate or have oral or genital contact with animal/s.** Children in urban and suburban areas rarely have contact the genitalia of animals. Children on farms might have some sexual contact with animals but it is limited. Children who engage in repeated sexualized behaviors with animals or who harm animals raise concern.
15. **Children sexualize nonsexual things, interactions with others, or relationships.** For example, the child imagines “she wants to be my girlfriend,” or “he is thinking about doing sex” without any observable basis for thinking this. When a child, more often than his or her peers, sees everyday objects as sexual, or sees people as only sexual objects, this is a concern.
16. **Sexual behaviors cause physical or emotional pain or discomfort to self or others.** When a child’s interest in things related to sex and sexuality intrudes on others’ emotional or physical privacy or body space making them uncomfortable, this is cause for concern. If the child’s sexual behaviors are causing them or others physical pain, this creates additional concern.
17. **Children use sex to hurt others.** When sex and pain, sex and disappointment, sex and hurt, sex and jealousy or sex and other negative emotions and experiences have been paired in the child’s home environment, the child may learn to use sex as a weapon. Angry sexual language and gestures, as well as sexual touching, become a way to get back at people. In domestic violence this pairing of sex with negative emotions and harm occurs frequently.
18. **Verbal and/or physical expressions of anger precede, follow or accompany the sexual behavior.** In healthy development, sexual expression and exploration is accompanied by positive emotions. Verbal or physical aggression that accompanies children’s sexual behaviors or language is a learned response. In general, children who repeat this behavior have witnessed repeated instances of verbally and/or physically aggressive behavior that has occurred in the context of their caregivers’ relationships. While continuous viewing of sex and aggression on the television, in films and videos can have very negative effects on young children, experiences in their homes are far more damaging. When children see or hear their parents or caregivers using sexual language or gestures in aggressive ways, they learn from it.

When children use bad language it is generally with each other and out of the earshot of adults. If young children are using sexual language in a violent way and directing it at others, this is cause for concern.

19. **Children use distorted logic to justify their sexual actions. (“She didn’t say no.”)** When caught doing something wrong, children often try to make an excuse to avoid blame and responsibility. It is valuable to see if their rationalizations, denial and justifications are similar across all negative behaviors or specific to the sexual behaviors. When young children make excuses about their sexual behaviors that disregard others’ rights or deny responsibility for troublesome sexual behaviors, this raises concern.
20. **Coercion, force, bribery, manipulation or threats are associated with sexual behaviors.** Healthy sexual exploration may include some teasing or daring; unhealthy sexual expression involves the use of emotional or physical force or coercion to engage another child in sexual behavior. Children who engage in coercive sexual behavior may find a child who is emotionally or physically vulnerable to

coerce into the sexual behavior. Although infrequent in young children, groups of children may use sex to hurt other children.

This is an excerpt from Understanding Children's Sexual Behaviors: What's Natural and Healthy by, Toni Cavanagh Johnson, Ph.D. Published by the Institute on Violence, Abuse and Trauma, San Diego, CA.