

Children's Sexual Play: Healthy or Unhealthy?

<u>Healthy</u>	<u>Variable</u>	<u>Unhealthy</u>
Curiosity Learning	<i>Motivation</i>	Coercion/Control Emotional need Obsessive/Preoccupied
Mutual consent Equal power Spontaneous	<i>Dynamic</i>	Manipulation/Intimidation Unequal power or ability Strategized; uses games, tricks, bribery Compulsive, repetitive, lacking control Elicits complaints Uses drugs/alcohol
Talking Looking Touching Showing	<i>Activity</i>	Adult sex-like Hurts
Silly, fun, playful	<i>Affect</i>	Fear Shame Sense of secrecy



Have questions?

Need resources?

Get Help Now!

Online Help Center
<http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>

Stop It Now![®] prevents the sexual abuse of children by mobilizing adults, families and communities to take actions that protect children before they are harmed.

Warning Signs in Children and Adolescents of Possible Child Sexual Abuse

Any one sign doesn't mean that a child was sexually abused, but the presence of several suggests that you begin asking questions and consider seeking help. Keep in mind that some of these signs can emerge at other times of stress such as:

- During a divorce
- Death of a family member or pet
- Problems at school or with friends
- Other anxiety-inducing or traumatic events

Behavior you may see in a child or adolescent

- Has nightmares or other sleep problems without an explanation
- Seems distracted or distant at odd times
- Has a sudden change in eating habits
 - Refuses to eat
 - Loses or drastically increases appetite
 - Has trouble swallowing.
- Sudden mood swings: rage, fear, insecurity or withdrawal
- Leaves "clues" that seem likely to provoke a discussion about sexual issues
- Writes, draws, plays or dreams of sexual or frightening images
- Develops new or unusual fear of certain people or places
- Refuses to talk about a secret shared with an adult or older child
- Talks about a new older friend
- Suddenly has money, toys or other gifts without reason
- Thinks of self or body as repulsive, dirty or bad
- Exhibits adult-like sexual behaviors, language and knowledge

Signs more typical of younger children

- An older child behaving like a younger child (such as bed-wetting or thumb sucking)
- Has new words for private body parts
- Resists removing clothes when appropriate times (bath, bed, toileting, diapering)
- Asks other children to behave sexually or play sexual games
- Mimics adult-like sexual behaviors with toys or stuffed animal
- Wetting and soiling accidents unrelated to toilet training

351 Pleasant Street
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Signs more typical in adolescents

- Self-injury (cutting, burning)
- Inadequate personal hygiene
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Sexual promiscuity
- Running away from home
- Depression, anxiety
- Suicide attempts
- Fear of intimacy or closeness
- Compulsive eating or dieting

Physical warning signs

Physical signs of sexual abuse are rare. If you see these signs, bring your child to a doctor. Your doctor can help you understand what may be happening and test for sexually transmitted diseases.

- Pain, discoloration, bleeding or discharges in genitals, anus or mouth
- Persistent or recurring pain during urination and bowel movements
- Wetting and soiling accidents unrelated to toilet training

What You Can Do If You See Warning Signs

- Create a [Safety Plan](#). Don't wait for "proof" of child sexual abuse.
- Look for patterns of behavior that make children less safe. Keep track of behaviors that concern you. This [Sample Journal Page](#) can be a helpful tool.
- See our [Let's Talk Guidebook](#) for tips on speaking up whenever you have a concern.
- If you have questions or would like resources or guidance for responding to a specific situation, visit our [Online Help Center](#), <http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>.

Remember, the most effective prevention takes place before there's a child victim to heal or an offender to punish.

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Signs That a Child or Teen May Be At-Risk to Harm Another Child

More than a third of all sexual abuse of children is committed by someone under the age of 18. Children, particularly younger children, may take part in inappropriate interactions without understanding how it might be hurtful to others. For this reason, it may be more helpful to talk about a child's sexually "harmful" behavior rather than sexually "abusive" behavior.

Do you know a child or adolescent who is:

Confused about social rules and interactions

- May experience typical gestures of friendliness or affection as sexual?
- Explores his or her own natural sexual curiosity with younger children or those of differing size, status, ability, or power?
- Seeks out the company of younger children and spends an unusual amount of time with them rather than with peers?
- Takes younger children to "secret" places or hideaways or plays "special" games with them (e.g. playing doctor, undressing or touching games, etc.)?
- Insists on physical contact with a child when the child resists the attention?

Anxious, depressed or seeming to need help

- Tells you they do not want to be alone with a child, or group of children, or becomes anxious about being with a particular young person?
- Was physically, sexually or emotionally abused and has not been offered adequate resources and support for recovery?
- Seems to be crying for help, i.e. behaves as if they want to be caught; leaves "clues" or acts in ways that seem likely to provoke a discussion about sexual issues?

Impulsively sexual or aggressive

- Links sexuality and aggression in language or behavior (e.g. makes sexual threats or insults)?
- Unable to control inappropriate sexual behaviors involving another child after being told to stop?
- Engages in sexually harassing behavior?
- Shares alcohol, drugs, or sexual material with younger children or teens?
- Views sexual images of children on the Internet or elsewhere?
- Forces sexual interaction, including direct contact and non-contact (like exposing genitals) on another adolescent or child?

For more information and guidance about responding to a child with these behaviors, please visit our Online Help Center, <http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>.

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Signs That an Adult May Be At-Risk to Harm a Child

Someone you care about may be acting in ways that worry or confuse you. The behaviors below may indicate a possible risk of sexual abuse to a child, but may also be a way for this adult to ask for help.

Many people with sexual behavior problemsⁱ believe that others already suspect and often wish someone would ask what's going on or advise them where to call to get help. Remember, you can start a conversation by pointing out harmful impacts on a child without accusing someone of abusive intentions.

Do you have concerns about someone you know in these areas of daily life?

Relationships

- Misses or ignores social cues about others' personal or sexual limits and boundariesⁱ?
- Often has a "special" child friend, maybe a different one from year to year?
- Spends most of his/her spare time with children and shows little interest in spending time with someone their own age?
- Encourages silence and secrets in children?

Sexual Interactions

- Links sexuality and aggression in language or behavior, e.g. sexualized threats or insults, like "whore" or "slut"?
- Makes fun of children's body parts, describes children with sexual words like "stud" or "sexy" or talks again and again about the sexual activities of children or teens?
- Masturbates so often that it gets in the way of important day-to-day activities?
- Has an interest in sexual fantasies involving children and seems unclear about what's appropriate with children?
- Looks at child pornographyⁱ or downloads/views Internet pornographyⁱ and is not willing to show whether children are involved?
- Asks adult partners to dress or act like a child or teen during sexual activity?

Personal safety/responsibility

- Has been known to make poor decisions while misusing drugs or alcohol?
- Justifies behavior, defends poor choices or harmful acts; blames others to refuse responsibility for behaviors?
- Minimizes hurtful or harmful behaviors when confronted; denies harmfulness of actions or words despite a clear negative impact?

For more information and guidance about starting a conversation with someone who behaves in these ways, please visit our Online Help Center, <http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>.



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Behaviors to Watch for When Adults Are With Children

We all have personal likes and things that make us uncomfortable. "Personal space" is the private area of control inside an imaginary line or boundary that defines each person as separate. Ideally, that boundary helps us stay in charge of our own personal space. It helps keep out the things that make us uncomfortable - unsafe and unwanted feelings, words, images, and physical contact. Solid social rules strengthen the boundary. Behaviors that routinely disrespect or ignore boundaries make children vulnerable to abuse.

Do you know an adult or older child who doesn't seem to understand what's acceptable when it comes to:

Personal space

- Makes others uncomfortable by ignoring social, emotional or physical boundaries or limits?
- Refuses to let a child set any of his or her own limits? Uses teasing or belittling language to keep a child from setting a limit?
- Insists on hugging, touching, kissing, tickling, wrestling with or holding a child even when the child does not want this physical contact or attention?
- Frequently walks in on children/teens in the bathroom?

Relationships with children

- Turns to a child for emotional or physical comfort by sharing personal or private information or activities, normally shared with adults?
- Has secret interactions with teens or children (e.g. games, sharing drugs, alcohol, or sexual material) or spends excessive time emailing, text messaging or calling children or youth?
- Insists on or manages to spend uninterrupted time alone with a child?
- Seems "too good to be true, i.e. frequently babysits different children for free; takes children on special outings alone; buys children gifts or gives them money for no apparent reason?
- Allows children or teens to consistently get away with inappropriate behaviors?

Sexual conversation or behavior

- Frequently points out sexual images or tells dirty or suggestive jokes with children present?
- Exposes a child to adult sexual interactions or images without apparent concern?
- Is overly interested in the sexuality of a particular child or teen (e.g., talks repeatedly about the child's developing body or interferes with normal teen dating)?

Good boundaries help prevent abuse. For more information and guidance about starting a conversation with someone who behaves in these ways, please visit our Online Help Center, <http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>



Role Plays: Low Risk Situations

Instructions: Pick a role play, then choose who will be the person bringing up the concern, who will be the person to cross boundaries and who will be the observer. When you're done - switch; make sure everyone gets the chance to be in each role.

The Model

- Set the tone - shared responsibility and accountability
- Describe the behavior
- State what you want
- Speak up and set boundaries

Slide Name: Practice, Practice, Practice

- Your dentist is regularly ½ hour late
- Your neighbor's dog has been digging holes in your yard
- Grandmother lets children stay up past their bedtime
- Your roommate always leaves a mess
- Your food has arrived cold at a fancy restaurant

Role Plays: Adults Crossing Boundaries

Instructions: Pick a role play, then choose who will be the person bringing up the concern, who will be the person to cross boundaries and who will be the observer. When you're done - switch; make sure everyone gets the chance to be in each role.

The Model

- Set the tone - shared responsibility and accountability
- Describe the behavior
- State what you want
- Speak up and set boundaries

Slide Name: Role Play Scenarios

Parent/Family Scenarios

- Your child has told you your spouse asked them to keep a secret about buying them something.
- You are concerned that your spouse may be looking at illegal images.
- Aunt Mary (visiting for 2 weeks) tells your 6 year-old that he is going to break lots of hearts, and jokes about being younger so that she can take a “roll in the hay with him.”

Professional Caregiver/Educator Scenarios

- A parent tells you that your assistant teacher texted their 14 year-old that they are “sexy.”

- A parent in your day camp program has been bringing gifts to another camper (not his own child) and asking personal questions about the child's home life.
- In the teacher's lounge, you overhear the librarian talking on the phone about an overseas trip, and how cool it was to see so many young, pretty girls "dating" older men.

Concerned Community Member Scenarios

- You have noticed that your neighbor has been standing at the bus stop with a group of children since school started.
- In your house of worship, you've noticed a religious leader taking a special interest in a 13 year-old, often bringing them alone to their office.
- Your supervisor has been bringing his 9 year-old to work daily after school, and a colleague has been spending a lot of time with her and you have observed him telling this girl that her dad just doesn't understand her the way he does and he has been talking about the dating websites he has been visiting.

Sample Scripts for Role Plays

1. Set the tone: shared responsibility and accountability

- I know we both really care about the children here at _____ (*our program/school/foster agency/residential home*).
- I can tell how much you love _____ (*child*) and I know _____ (*he/she/they*) love you too!
- It's clear to me that we both want what's best for the children in our lives that we care about.
- It seems like you care about my child, and I want to talk with you so that we both get on the same page about _____ (*his/her/their*) wellbeing.

2. Be honest and genuine

- Bringing this up is really difficult for me, but it's also important. I wouldn't share this with you if this didn't feel necessary.
- I've spent a lot of time thinking over how I wanted to word this, and honestly, I'm really worried because I don't want to offend you.
- Oh gosh – I'm nervous! This is not something I feel comfortable talking about, but I wanted to have this important discussion with you because I really care about you, our relationship together, and _____ (*child*).
- I don't know how to word this, and this feels awkward because I don't know you very well, but it's important because it involves _____'s (*child's*) safety.

3. Describe the behavior (and why it's not okay)

- The other day I saw you _____ (*behavior*), and that's not okay. It can give _____ (*child*) a really unsafe message about how the adults they look up to should be treating them. What if someone else – someone with harmful intentions – did _____ (*behavior*), then they may not understand that this isn't appropriate because this has been normalized as okay. Instead we want _____ (*child*) to always speak up if someone is doing something like this with them.
- I feel _____ (*emotion*) when you _____ (*behavior*) with/around _____ (*child*). What you're doing is actually crossing boundaries. What if another adult were to do that around them – we want to make sure that _____ (*child*) understands that this type of behavior isn't safe.
- It's not safe for you to do _____ (*behavior*) with youth.
- I noticed that you _____ (*behavior*) with _____ (*child*), and I want to be clear that what you're doing crosses boundaries.

4. State what you want (and consider offering alternatives)















- I'm asking that you don't do _____ (*behavior*) because it's against our _____ (*program rules/safety plan*). I'm wondering if there are other ways you can _____ (*behavior*, for example - show affection to a child that doesn't violate their boundaries and respects their "no").
- It sounds like you wanted to joke around, but making sexualized comments about a young child is against our family's safety plan. We never use adult-like language or mature jokes around children in our family.
- I hear that you're looking to do something nice, but we don't single one child out in this day camp. We actually have a rule here that asks all adults to treat children equally, so we give any "special treats" to all kids out in the open.
- It seems like you are looking to connect with this 13 year-old, but it's vital for us to be giving kids healthy messages about how adults should be interacting with them. I saw that our religious institution has a set of guidelines that talks about how adults – including faith leaders – should interact with youth, and it says that doors should stay open or that there should always be two adults with one child – meaning that one child should never be alone with one adult. I'm asking that you follow that policy and either keep the doors open when you meet with this teen or have another adult with you when you're speaking to them.

5. Set boundaries

- I am talking to you about this because I want you to be involved in keeping _____ (*child*) safe. Please follow our _____ (*program policy/safety plan rule*) about _____ (*describe rule/guideline/policy*).
- It's important that you _____ (*state rule from safety plan or program policy*).
- I'm asking that you follow this _____ (*program policy/safety plan rule*) about _____ (*describe rule/guideline/policy*). If this happens again I will need to follow up by _____ (*further boundary-setting/additional involvement of supervisors/other action steps*).
- It sets a good example for _____ (*child*) when everyone is on the same page about healthy behavior, so that's why I'm sharing all this with you. Next time I'd like you to remember and respect our _____ (*program policy/safety plan rule*) about _____ (*describe rule/guideline/policy*).



Resources for Support, Information, and Guidance – for Parents and Youth

- **Stop It Now!**, Helpline offers referrals and support by phone, email, and online chat; online advice column; tip sheets, resources, and tools; prevention education. Helpline open:
Monday 12pm-8pm EST
Tuesday 12pm-6pm EST
Wednesday 12pm-6pm EST
Thursday 10am-6pm EST
Friday 12pm-6pm EST
 <http://www.stopitnow.org/>
 1.888.PREVENT
- **Boys Town National Hotline**, 24/7 crisis and support line for children, youth and their parents; Spanish available; multi-topic and issue assistance. Also known as **Your Life, Your Voice**, 24/7 crisis helpline for teens, includes email, chat and text.
 <http://www.yourlifeyourvoice.org/>
 <http://www.boystown.org/national-hotline>
 1.800.448.3000
- **Childhelp**, 24/7 anonymous and confidential assistance in 170 languages to adults, children, and youth with information and questions regarding child abuse.
 <http://www.childhelp.org/>
 1.800.4ACHILD
- **National Runaway Safeline**, 24/7 crisis hotline for youth thinking about running away, for youth already on the run, and for adults worried about a runaway.
 <http://www.1800runaway.org/>
 1.800.RUNAWAY
- **National Teen Dating Abuse Hotline**, 24/7 peer advocacy available to support teens with concerns about dating violence
 <http://www.loveisrespect.org/>
 1.800.331.9474
- **Trevor Project Lifeline**, 24/7 crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth.
 <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help-now>
 1.866.488.7386
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**, 24/7 support and assistance for anyone feeling depressed, overwhelmed, or suicidal.
 <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/talk-to-someone-now>

☎ 1.800.273.TALK

- **National Domestic Violence Hotline**, National call center in 160 languages, refers to local resources.
🌐 <http://www.thehotline.org/help>
☎ 1.800.799.SAFE
- **National Parent Helpline**, Helpline for parent and caregiver support. Open Monday through Friday 10am-7pm PST.
🌐 <http://www.nationalparenthelpline.org/>
☎ 1.855.4A.PARENT
- **Naseeha**, Confidential Muslim youth helpline. Open 7 days a week 3pm-9pm EST.
🌐 <http://naseeha.org/>
☎ 1.866.NASEEHA