How Understanding and Responding to Children’s Sexual Behavior Can Help Prevent Child Sexual Abuse

This workshop developed by Stop It Now! Minnesota
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Objectives/Key Concepts

- Increase comfort and skills in discussing children’s sexual behaviors with other adults.
- Understand how to use context to determine whether sexual behaviors between children are developmentally expected.
- Understand the concepts of risk and protective factors.
- Know where to go for additional information about children’s sexual behaviors.
- Understand the connection between understanding children’s sexual behaviors and preventing child sexual abuse.
Training Agenda

- **30 minutes**
  - Brief overview of [Organization offering the training]
  - What is child sexual abuse?
  - Who sexually abuses children?
  - Developmentally expected sexual behaviors in children and youth

- **45 minutes**
  - How to respond to concerning behaviors
  - Warning signs in children and youth
  - Risk and protective factors

- **45 minutes**
  - Childcare scenarios
  - Resources
  - Questions, answers, discussion
Preventing the sexual abuse of a child...

- before a child is harmed

and

- before an adult, adolescent or another child acts in a sexually harmful way towards a child.

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Stop It Now! Minnesota activities and services...

- National confidential helpline: 1-888-PREVENT (773-8368)
- Website www.stopitnow.org/mn
- Development of educational materials
- Community outreach and education
- Research and evaluation
- Public policy development
What is child sexual abuse?

"Child sexual abuse involves any sexual activity with a child where consent is not or cannot be given. This includes sexual contact that is accomplished by force or threat of force, regardless of the age of the participants, and all sexual contact between an adult and a child, regardless of whether there is deception or the child understands the sexual nature of the activity. Sexual contact between an older and a younger child also can be abusive if there is a significant disparity in age, development, or size, rendering the younger child incapable of giving informed consent. The sexually abusive acts may include sexual penetration, sexual touching, or non-contact sexual acts such as exposure or voyeurism."

(From the APSAC Handbook on Child Maltreatment, 2nd edition, 2002).
Who sexually abuses children?

(1) In 90% of child sexual abuse cases a child is harmed by someone they know and trust. (Finkelhor, 1994)

(2) Approximately 40 – 60% of reported abuse is incest. (Dubé & Hébert, 1988; Finkelhor, 1980; Mian, Wehrspann, Kajlner-Diamond, Le Baron, & Winder, 1986; Sauzier, 1989)

(3) 30 – 50% of child sexual abuse cases a child is harmed by someone younger than 18 years old. (Rogers and Tremain, 1984)

(4) 88% of child sexual abuse cases are never reported to the authorities. (Kilpatrick, 1999)
Where do you go when you are in crisis?
Why do we need to care about sexual development?

- To prevent child sexual abuse, we must raise healthy children who will not sexually abuse.

- Adults need to be the primary sexuality educators in children’s lives.

- As adults, we must create the environment that supports healthy sexual development and addresses behaviors that are abusive or cause for concern.
“Natural and healthy child sexual behavior”

according to Toni Cavanagh Johnson:

“Natural and healthy sexual exploration during childhood is an **information-gathering process** wherein children explore each other’s and their own bodies by **looking and touching** (ex: playing doctor), as well as **explore gender roles and behaviors** (ex: playing house). Children involved in normal sexual play are generally of **similar age, size and developmental status**. While siblings engage in mutual sexual exploration, most sex play is between children who have an **ongoing mutually enjoyable play or school friendship**. The sexual behaviors are limited in type and frequency and occur in **several periods** of the child’s life.”
Adult Sexuality versus Childhood Sexual Behaviors

Based on the book “Understanding Your Child’s Sexual Behavior: What’s Natural and Healthy”
Toni Cavanagh Johnson, Ph.D.

- Many of the behaviors of children have to do with discovering gender differences and studying sex roles.

- Children are sexual but not in the same way as adults where arousal and pleasure are the goals.

- It is important for adults to view these behaviors from the child’s viewpoint and not their own personal experiences.
Context of Sexual Behaviors

- **Differences in power**
  - e.g., age, size, physical or mental abilities

- **Intimidation**
  - e.g., status or misuse of authority

- **Manipulation**
  - e.g., games, tricks, bribes, verbal persuasion

- **Compulsiveness**
  - e.g., repetitive, lack of control

- **Coercion**
  - e.g., threats, physical force, weapons

- **Secrecy**
  - e.g., covering up, demanding silence

- **Obsessive-ness**
  - e.g., preoccupation with sexual thoughts

(Adapted from Burton, Rasmussen, et al., 1998)
Developmentally Expected Sexual Behavior in Children and Youth
(Adapted from Wurele & Miller-Perrin, 1992):

Pre-School (0-5 years):

- **Common**: Sexual language relating to differences in body parts, bathroom talk, pregnancy and birth. Genital stimulation at home and in public. Showing and looking at private body parts.

- **Uncommon**: Discussion of sexual acts. Contact experiences with other children without clothing.
School Age (6-12 years):

- **Common**: Questions about menstruation, pregnancy, sexual behavior. “Experimenting” with same-age children, including kissing, hugging, holding hands, and role-playing. Genital stimulation at home or other private places.

- **Uncommon**: Use of explicit sexual words and discussing sexual acts.
Adolescence (13-16 years):

- **Common**: Questions about decision-making, social relationships, and sexual customs. Masturbation in private. Experimenting between adolescents of the same age, including open-mouth kissing, fondling, and body rubbing. Also, interest in other peers’ bodies. Sexual intercourse occurs in approximately one third of this age group.

- **Uncommon**: Sexual interest in much younger children.
Sexual Behavior Warning Signs in Children and Youth

- Views child pornography on the internet
- Takes younger children to secret places
- Plays “secret” games with younger children (ex: doctor, pants-down games, etc.)
- Plays games with a child that the adolescent would otherwise avoid or hate (ex: playing house with a child of five)
- Experiences sudden wide changes in moods or habits
- Insists on hugging or kissing a child when the child does not want to be hugged or kissed
- Tells you he or she does not want to be left alone with a child
- Becomes anxious when he or she is told about a particular person coming to visit
- Focuses intense attention on or is overly interested in the physical maturing of children
- Shows sexual materials to younger children
- Exposes his or her genitals to younger children or forces sex on another adolescent or child

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Responding to possibly problematic childhood sexual behaviors...

- **Look at the context of the situation, not just the content**
  - Inquisitive 8 year old

- **Use common sense**
  - Learning to reach out and touch someone
All children who molest exhibit sexualized behavior; not every sexualized child molests other children.

- Eliana Gil, Ph.D. 1993
Protective Factors
(Gilgun, 2004).

- relationship(s) with confidante(s)
- capacities for engaging in self-soothing behaviors
- a strong desire to be pro-social and the resources to accomplish this
- a favorable sense of self
- an affirming ethnic and cultural identity
- emotional expressiveness
- and hope
Risk Factors
(Gilgun 2004)

- childhood maltreatment
- poor mental health of parents
- war
- dangerous neighborhoods
- homelessness
- natural disasters
- and a range of other stressors, such as illness, the absence of a mother or father, family relocation, and physical punishment of children
Scenario #1

A single mother of a child in your care reports that her daughter, who is 3, has started using sexual language and has been asking a lot of questions of her mother about sexuality. The mother is concerned that her daughter may have been exposed to an abusive situation at daycare as her daughter is not exposed to any other men or children outside of the daycare. The mother also discloses that she was abused as a child by her brother.

- What concerns do you have about the situation?
- What further questions would you want to ask?
- What actions would you take as the provider?
- What would you recommend the mother do?
Scenario #2

A child of 9 in your care has been exhibiting a lot of sexual behavior. He tries to get other children alone and he uses a lot of sexual language. You have spoken to him about some of these things before yet the behavior persists. Last week you discover him and another boy of the same age in the bathroom together with their pants down.

How do you handle this situation?

- When it first happens?
- After?
Scenario #3

You find two children during nap time with their clothes off playing and giggling. The boy and the girl are the same age.

- What further questions do you have?
- How would you handle this situation?
- How do you respond immediately upon walking into the room and seeing the children?
Scenario #4

A father of 2 boys, 12 and 7yo, reports the 7yo is acting out sexually with younger peers at after-school care. He is also concerned about the 12yo behaviors that involve intimidation of the 7yo. Last weekend he found the boys in the 12 yo’s bedroom disrobed, engaged in “touching games.”

- What aspects of this scenario stick out to you?
- What further questions would you want to ask?
- What actions would you recommend to the parent?
Stop It Now! Resources...

- Toll-free confidential Stop It Now! helpline: 1-888-PREVENT (773-8678)
- “Do Children Sexually Abuse other Children?”
- “Facts About Abuse and Those Who Might Commit It”
- “Let’s Talk: Adults Talking to Adults about Child Sexual Abuse”
Additional Resources…

“Understanding Children’s Sexual Behaviors: What’s Natural and Healthy”
by Toni Cavanagh Johnson

“Sex & Sensibility: The Thinking Parent’s Guide to Talking Sense About Sex”
by Deborah Roffman

“Childhood Sexuality: A Guide for Parents”
by Gail Ryan and Joanne Blum

“A Very Touching Book…for little people and for big people…”
by Jan Hindman
Child sexual abuse is not inevitable. It’s preventable.