

Can a Child Sexually Harass Another Child?

Young kids are often curious about their own and other children's bodies, but where is the line between healthy exploring and harassment?

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Several recent Reddit posts have told tales terrifying parents browsing through their favorite forum. One post told a story of kids playing doctor at daycare, with a young boy asking her daughter to “show her girl parts” and repeatedly touching her bottom. Another user shared the story of a child hugging another, while the latter said no. Both labeled the incidents as harassment. But can a child sexually harass another child?

The answer is more complicated than a worried parent may think. But, according to Jamie M. Howard, Ph.D., a senior clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, explains, “It's pretty uncommon for a kid to intentionally sexually harass another child.”

Intent is the operative word here. Children can unarguably make other children uncomfortable, but they rarely are acting with sexual intent at a young age. Preschoolers playing doctor have very different intentions than teenagers playing doctor. “Sit on your urge to explode with emotion,” says Dr. Howard. “We don't want to project all of our own terrors onto kids. We want to see how they feel and not necessarily skew them to be more distraught than they are.”

Instead, talk to your child to try to figure out the intention of the action—whether your child was the victim or perpetrator of some questionable behavior. Dr. Howard suggests asking open-ended questions: Where were you? Who was there? What did they do? How did you feel? By keeping queries broad, parents can learn about what happened without scaring kids more or making them feel like they did anything wrong.

She recommends parents go into daycare or school and talk to the teachers about what their child told them and hear what they've observed as well. Then it becomes easier to piece together what occurred and how to move forward to keep kids safe, depending on the ages of the kids involved and the severity of the incident.

Curious Exploring in Daycare or Preschool

Preschool is a curious age—and that includes curiosity about kids' own bodies and the bodies of their peers, says Jenny Coleman, director of Stop It Now!, an anti-child abuse organization that runs a helpline for anyone with questions around abuse. "We have to remember that children do engage in sexual behaviors just like they engage in a whole host of other behaviors," she says. "It's part of experimentation, it's part of play, it's part of learning and discovery, and it's part of healthy sexuality development."

Dr. Howard says it's not unusual for kids to be fascinated with the bodies of their parents, siblings, or peers. And that's exactly the right time to start teaching young children boundaries about their bodies and others'.

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"You want to be really concrete and simple and say, 'This is your body, you can touch your body, but you can touch your private parts only in a private space,'" says Dr. Howard. She recommends spelling out which body parts are "private" using biological terms like penis and vagina. She says it's common for kids who are excited about learning to want to share their new insights with classmates and show off a private part, but it's important to explain, "No other kids get to see it. Don't offer. It's just for you to look at."

"They won't necessarily understand in preschool that it makes other kids uncomfortable. And that's okay, because they follow rules if they know them at that age," explains Dr. Howard. Families can make rules about who gets to see or talk about private parts (for example, parents and doctors with parental supervision) and discuss how showing yours or asking to see other kids' private parts is against the rules.

This is a great way to start talking about consent, says Coleman. “Start by talking about what it means to respect our own bodies and others' bodies, too—this means not touching someone without their permission, and also knowing that no one is allowed to touch their body without their permission.”

Grade School Bullying

As kids go through elementary school, intent changes from curious development minds at work to potential bullying. “Elementary-aged kids can be mean to each other,” says Dr. Howard, “to be inappropriate but not appreciating the sexual nature of it.”

This could include spanking another child’s bottom, pulling down a kid’s pants, telling dirty jokes, or other boundary-pushing moves. It’s not necessarily sexual, but it’s attention-grabbing, it’s embarrassing for the target, and it’s downright mean.

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Dr. Howard suggests that, like with all bullying prevention, parents teach kids to tell a teacher or other adult about mean behavior, whether they’re the victim or a bystander. And she stresses that kids should know that reporting inappropriate actions is different than tattling: it’s keeping other kids safe. Then teachers and parents can talk to the offending student about both bullying and reinforcing those personal bubble boundaries.

She also notes that if a first, second, or third grader is acting out in an overtly sexual way, often they either don’t understand why it’s inappropriate or they might have been exposed to sexual media, porn, or even sexual abuse. In addition to educating the child about school and home rules, they might benefit from talking to a counselor to determine if there’s something else going on.

When Puberty Hits

“In terms of intentional sexual harassment, we usually think of that happening more around puberty when kids start to become more sexual beings,” says Dr. Howard. Puberty starts at different times for different kids, however, she says the end of elementary school is where intentions can begin to be overtly sexual. Once kids have sexual urges and interests, minors can absolutely sexually harass other minors and steps can be taken to address it. It's crucial for parents to foster an open environment where tweens and teens can talk about consent, feelings, and questions about sexuality. That goes for all genders—all kids should feel confident in talking to their parents about any behavior that makes them uncomfortable, no matter the perpetrator's age.

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It's also important to reiterate that if harmful touching does occur, it's not the fault of the person who is touched.

What Parents Should Expect from Daycares and Schools

If your child tells you they observed or experienced inappropriate behavior at school, your first step is to talk to your child's teachers. You can work with a teacher to come up with a plan to increase supervision, separate students, or even switch classes.

Parents can also look at a daycare or school's handbook or guidelines to see what steps they take if a child says something inappropriate occurred. Then parents can assess whether they think those rules are enough to keep kids safe or assess whether the school or daycare is following through on their own rules. If not, Coleman suggests it might be time to look at other options. “If you have to get heavy-handed in forcing a program to be responsive, that's giving you a lot of information about that program in general.”

In most states, daycare and school workers are mandatory reporters. That means they “are mandated by law to report child maltreatment,” according to the Children’s Bureau of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. That includes harassment or abuse by adults or inappropriate touching by a fellow child, says Coleman.

“Any time a child is at risk of being harmed or is being harmed, regardless of who’s doing it, we make a report to either the police or child protection services,” says Coleman. For parents wondering whether something should be reported at a daycare or school, she adds, “You can always call child protection services and ask them, ‘Here’s what I know, is this something that needs to be reported and are you the right people?’”

If parents think that their child is being harmed at daycare or school (by another child or an adult), they can report it to their state department of childcare or family services.

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