

## Children's Sexual Play: Healthy or Unhealthy?

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





Have questions?

Need resources?

**Get Help Now!**

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

Stop It Now!<sup>®</sup> 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

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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 problems<sup>i</sup> 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 boundaries<sup>i</sup>?
- 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 pornography<sup>i</sup> or downloads/views Internet pornography<sup>i</sup> 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>







## Talking About Concerns

### Share your feelings

*"I feel uncomfortable bringing this up but I wanted you to know what happened today."*

### Describe the behavior

*"During nap time Michael and Justin were naked together."*

*"Today I saw Janie grab Jason's crotch when they were playing."*

### Share how you reacted

*"I explained that they need to keep their clothes on."*

*"I reminded Janie to keep her hands to herself."*

### Share information and resources

*"A lot of times, toddlers like to take their clothes off and look at each other, especially with their friends. They got dressed right away and it never came up with rest of the day. If it happens again, I'll let you know. Let's just reinforce the rule that we keep our clothes on when we play with our friends."*

*"I'm worried because Janie was being really rough with Jason. I told her very clearly not to do that again. If it happens again, I'll be concerned and we can talk about what to do next. I suggest keeping a close eye on her when she's playing with friends to see if this is just a one-time thing or if this is something she tries again."*

### Ask clarifying questions

*"Has this happened before?"*

*"Have you noticed any changes in her behavior?"*