

When Children Act Out Sexually

A Guide for Parents and Teachers



*The most
important thing*

we can say

to children, is

"Talk about it."

Sexual Abuse Information Series 2008

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VISAC (Vancouver Incest and Sexual Abuse Centre) is a program of Family Services of Greater Vancouver. VISAC offers a wide range of services including specialized victim support services, individual and group therapy for children, youth, families, and adults who have experienced childhood sexual abuse and/or trauma.

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This booklet answers these questions:

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Why is it hard to recognize the problem?

There are few problems as difficult for parents, teachers, and day-care staff as deciding how to deal with children in their care who are imposing sexual behaviour on other children. There are many questions to consider. Should you simply ignore the behaviour and hope the child will 'grow out of it'? Or should you attempt to correct the behaviour, and run the risk of making the child feel guilty about normal sexual curiosity?

How do you deal with your own discomfort in addressing the problem? Many adults in charge of young children come from homes where sex was never discussed. There is a substantial emphasis on sex in today's society, so we may assume that our children are sexually

sophisticated. We may risk viewing children's sexual behaviour and language as a sign of the times and do nothing about it or we may envy their 'openness', and compare it unfavourably with our own 'repressed' childhoods.

Children today do have access to more information about sex but it is also true that they are exposed to more misinformation.

They also experience a lot of sexual pressure from the media and from society as a whole. To help children in trouble, we must base our decisions on what we know as fact and not on what we imagine to be true.

To know whether a child is being sexually aggressive or simply curious, we need to understand children's normal sexual

development. There is a world of difference, for example, between two children in a daycare pulling their pants down to look at one another's genitals and a child forcing an object into another child's anus.

*All children are different
and develop at different rates.*

What is normal sexual development?

Unless children are interfered with, their sexual development follows a natural sequence regardless of what society may think about sex at any given time. Children are born sexual. Boys are often born with erect penises and girls with lubricated vaginas. Masturbation is normal at all ages.

Some of the following behaviour changes may take place at approximately the following ages:

2-1/2 Years: Children begin to notice that boys and girls assume different postures to urinate. They may attempt to copy one another's postures. They begin to show interest in physical differences.

4 Years: Children may play games of 'show'. They may use 'bathroom' talk, and call one another names like 'Poophead'. They are interested in their own genitals and those of others, they like to play nurse-doctor-patient games with peers and during play activities will look, touch and sometimes attempt to insert objects into body openings. They enjoy nudity and become aware of gender sex roles. When you take them to visit friends, they may show an interest in unfamiliar bathrooms. They may role-play activities they associate with Mommy and Daddy.

5 Years: Children become more modest and will demand greater privacy.

6 Years: Children begin to demand practical answers about the differences in the sexes. They may want to know where babies come from and how they are made. Parents should give children short concrete explanations which don't tax their ability to listen.

7 Years: There is generally less interest in sexual matters.

8 Years: Experimentation becomes more hidden as children become more aware of social rules. Formal games diminish but children are still interested in exploration as it relates to stimulation. Children experiment with friends of the same sex because it is not as intimidating; mutual masturbation is not uncommon. Sex play also takes the form of sex-related jokes, sexual rhymes, provocative giggling and whispering.



9 Years: Children begin to exchange sex information with friends of the same sex. They may look in books for information about their sexual organs and how they function.

10 Years: Some girls and a few boys will have reached puberty by age 10. Children show greater interest in the opposite sex. There is considerable interest in sex-related jokes, which will be a little more sophisticated than the jokes they told when they were 8.

Don't be alarmed if children appear to skip some of these stages. All children are different and they all develop at different rates. The stages listed here are generally true, and are simply intended as a guideline to help you make an initial judgment about whether a specific child's sexual behaviour is considered age-appropriate.

The most important thing we can say to children, is "Talk about it."

How is normal sexual development disrupted?

It can be disrupted by the unwanted and forceful sexual attention of adults, older children or aggressive children their own age.

Forceful sexual attention may take several forms, such as:

- Continued exposure to pornographic video, magazines or images on the internet. Pornographic material is most harmful to children if they are forced to watch it. However, it may also be harmful if it is left around the house in places where children can't miss it.
- Sexual behaviour in front of children. If children are forced to watch their baby-sitter having sex with a visiting friend, for example, it can be a harmful experience. But parents shouldn't worry if a child inadvertently walks in on their love-making. The difference is that the child is not forced to watch, and the activity can be explained in a way that reassures the child.

- Disrespectful sexual attitudes and frequent use of sexual language and innuendo may encourage children to be forceful and insensitive to others.
- Caregivers' failure to respect privacy or body boundaries. This can cause children to grow up unaware that others need privacy and have boundaries.
- Sexual abuse. When children are sexually abused, they will most likely experience developmental disruption. This happens because sexual abuse forces children to experience sexual activity when they are not physically or psychologically ready.

Are there signs a child may have been abused?

Yes. When children have been sexually abused or subjected to unwanted sexual attention, they may change their behaviour in a number of ways:

- They may exhibit behaviours such as night fears, fear of school changing rooms, depression, school failure and withdrawal from friends and activities.
- They may also exhibit aggressive behaviours such as fighting, being cruel to pets, setting fires, and acting out sexually against other children.

Why do abused children act out sexually?

Although there is evidence that sexually abused children can act out against other children, the reason they do so isn't always clear. People often assume that abused children would try to avoid repeating a frightening and distasteful activity. However, in many cases, children who have been sexually abused repeat the experience with other children in an effort to make sense of what happened to them and to regain a sense of control. For example, a boy may have been forced to perform oral sex on an older boy. The activity may have made him feel frightened, confused and sexually excited all at the same time. Repeating the activity with a younger child takes him out of the confused and helpless role and into a new and more powerful role. He is now less frightened and less anxious, and better understands why the older boy wanted oral sex performed on him.

Boys are often ashamed to say they have been victims, so acting out sexually may be a way of calling out for help. Sometimes boys will admit that they have done something sexual to another child before they will disclose being victims themselves.

Sexual acting out is only one of the ways in which children try to adapt to being abused. As a general rule, the more supported children feel after disclosing sexual abuse, the less likely they are to act out sexually. When we don't allow children, boys in particular, to admit to feeling powerless or helpless, we often create situations in which the only feelings allowed are anger and aggression.

The most important thing we can say to children is: "Talk about it – I want to know how you are feeling – I want to know what you are thinking and I want to help."

" I'm glad he told because he seemed really unhappy and we couldn't figure out why. Now that we know we can help him , "

How should you respond to children who act out sexually with other children?

Children who act out sexually should always be viewed with compassion. If their behaviour is upsetting to us, we may recoil and scapegoat them by calling them 'offenders' or 'abusers'. These children need help just as much as their victims and you should explore ways to offer support and intervention. This may mean reporting them to the police and/or a child protection authority.

Sometimes, when children are questioned, they will share that they themselves have been sexually abused by a teenager or an adult. Social service workers must protect children who act out sexually as well as their victims.

If children who abuse other children are 12 years or older, they may be charged under the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*. The judge will take into account their age. Charging young offenders holds them accountable for their actions and may provide them with access to the specialized counselling they require. The judge will often rely on the experience and testimony of social workers, police and others to distinguish between children who have just started to abuse and older teenagers who have a more severe problem.

Why is it important for adults to intervene when children act out sexually?

Children who act out sexually and are not stopped hurt other children and themselves. Because they relate to other children in a sexual way, they are deprived of a chance to have real friendships. When children have a guilty secret, it is hard for them to be open with others and this affects their social relationships.

A sense of power over others plus sexual excitement can be extremely rewarding, particularly since it compensates for poor self-esteem. The longer the sexual activities continue, the more difficult they are to stop.

A child may abuse a child who then begins to abuse other children. There may then be a ripple effect, with the children initiating still more children into sexual activity. This may happen in a school or neighborhood and it is another reason for adults to intervene when children act out sexually.



Children who act out sexually should always be viewed with compassion.

Sexual abuse of any kind thrives on secrecy; breaking secrecy is the first step towards helping everyone involved. Children who abuse must be interviewed by social services or police for two reasons: to help them admit to what they have done, and to provide insights as to why they are doing it. Once they admit to abusing, they are much less likely to continue. As long as they deny what they are doing, and deny their own probable victimization, they are much more likely to continue acting out in this way.

Don't overreact and don't underreact. Try to get all the facts of what happened and provide support to your child

How can we support a child who has acted out sexually?

As a parent, you can help in several different ways:

- Don't overreact and don't underreact, try to get all the facts about what happened and provide support to your child.
- Your child may need to be closely supervised and not be left alone with other children until he or she has learned to control her/his behaviour.
- You must maintain affection and support for your child. The sexually acting-out child already has low self-esteem, and is going through a crisis. The child needs plenty of love and attention.
- If the social workers or police recommend counselling for the child, it is important for you to comply. Parents sometimes believe that if they simply scold the child or withdraw privileges, the problem will be solved. They often mistakenly believe that a problem will go away of its own accord if it isn't discussed.
- You can work with your child's counsellor as much as possible to help your child change her/his behaviour.

Schools can help by using sexual abuse prevention programs.

School programs have already encouraged many children to disclose incidents of sexual abuse. Teachers presenting these programs should point out that it isn't just strangers in cars who sexually abuse children. It may be family members and it may even be other children.

Police can help by warning children of the consequences of their activities if they are carried into adolescence or adulthood.

Counsellors can help children understand the causes of their behaviour, and learn how to control it. It is important that the offending behaviour be addressed and controlled before dealing with previous victimization that may have occurred.

How can parents deal with their own feelings?

Finding out that your own child has sexually abused another child may be one of the most difficult life experiences you'll ever have to face. Most parents go into shock initially, then through a period of denial where they try to pretend that nothing has happened. For a while they might feel as though they're on a roller-coaster ride of unfamiliar and conflicting emotions.

Here are some common reactions:

There's been a mistake.

My child would never have done such a thing.

It's not our fault.

There's too much talk about sex these days. Look at the TV programming. It's a wonder they don't all grow up to be perverts.

I'm so ashamed.

Where did we go wrong?



Breaking secrecy is the first step towards helping everyone involved.

What will they do to her/him?

Will s/he be taken away ... have to go to jail ... or a foster-home?

We don't need any help. We've always handled our own problems as a family. If we can all pull together, we can put this behind us in no time.

I feel so helpless. Everyone else is 'calling the shots' now.

If you're a parent whose child has abused another child, it's normal to go through all of these reactions, often within a short span of time. Your child's counsellor or a counsellor of your own can help. The crisis may also trigger memories of sexual abuse incidents from your own childhood which perhaps you've tried to forget.

What will your child's counsellor do?

Usually your child's counsellor will have specialized training in child sexual abuse with a good knowledge of both victim and abuser treatment.

The counsellor will help you and your child do three important things:

- Learn strategies to deal with the molesting behaviour;
- Learn strategies to manage the feelings that led to the acting out behaviour; and
- Develop healthy sexual attitudes and social relationships.

With your help, the crisis can become an opportunity for change and growth.

The more that counsellors can help children talk about their behaviour, the more likely they are to stop.

Children develop sexually at their own rate and in their own way provided their development is not disrupted. Both parents and teachers have a critical role to play in identifying and helping children who are sexually abusing other children. Your worst fear may be that the child will grow up to be an adult sexual offender. It doesn't have to turn out that way. The more that counsellors can help children to manage their behaviour and express their feelings, the more likely they are to stop.

For information on internet safety go to www.CyberTip.ca and www.safecanada.ca

Additional resources are available at your community resource centre, your local library or the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.

