

Factsheet 1: What is problematic and harmful sexual behaviour?



Sexual behaviour is generally a normal, healthy part of development in children and young people.¹ It includes any behaviour, discussions or interests related to relationships, sexuality and sex.²

We can think about sexual behaviour as being made up of behaviours that range from *normal, healthy and age-appropriate* to *problematic and harmful*.³

'*Problematic and harmful sexual behaviours*' refers to all sexual behaviours that are concerning in children and young people. These behaviours can be directed to oneself and/or others.⁴ They can also include online behaviours, such as those involving the internet, texting or social media.⁵

| Problematic sexual behaviour | Harmful sexual behaviour |
|--|---|
| <p>Problematic sexual behaviour is sexual behaviour that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is not considered typical or developmentally appropriate for the age of the child or young person, and • can also include developmentally appropriate behaviours that are shown in a situation that is not appropriate.⁶ | <p>Harmful sexual behaviour is sexual behaviour that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is not appropriate for a child's stage of development, • may result in harm to the child or young person themselves or to others, or • may involve coercion, force, or a misuse of power towards another individual (e.g., child, young person, adult). |

How can I tell if a sexual behaviour is normal?

It is important to identify if a sexual behaviour is normal because it helps us make sure we are responding in the right way to the behaviour. Where needed, this will include helping the child or young person to get the support they need from us and other professionals.

Whether a sexual behaviour is normal depends on what is appropriate for the child's or young person's stage of development (e.g., emotional) and age. Other factors also need to be considered, such as whether they have a developmental or intellectual disability and their cultural context.⁷

Generally, normal sexual behaviour for a child or young person:⁸

- is appropriate for their stage of development and age
- does not interfere with their relationships
- does not interfere with their development (e.g., physical, social, emotional)
- is voluntary, mutual and those involved have consented
- is not harmful to others.

Some possible examples of normal, problematic, and harmful sexual behaviours can be found in the following table. **This is not a full list.** You can find detailed information and guidance in the resources in the box:

'*Where can I find out more about whether a sexual behaviour is normal?*'.

| Normal | Problematic | Harmful |
|--|---|---|
| Toddlers (1-3 years) | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rub or touch their genitals • Show someone else their genitals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still touching their genitals even if someone tries to get them to do something else • Inviting a child to engage in sexual activity or touching | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being left out of typical childhood activities due to persistent rubbing or touching of their genitals • Masturbation that causes injury to their genitals |
| Pre-schoolers (3-5 years) | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touch their genitals or masturbate • Kiss other children and hold their hands | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent rubbing or touching of their genitals in public despite others trying to distract them or get them to move on to something else • Persistent coarse sexual language despite being told not to use such language | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated rubbing or touching of other’s genitals • Talking persistently about sexual activities and sex |
| School age (5-8 years) | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touch their genitals or masturbate • Be more private about their body and bodies generally | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tricking or forcing children into playing games of a sexual nature • Persistent flashing of their bottoms or genitals to children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online pornography use on a daily basis or more often • Preference for masturbation instead of doing other enjoyable things |
| Pre-teens (9-12 years) | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masturbate in private • Kissing and flirting with peers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being preoccupied with masturbation • A single event of interest in pornography | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic (ongoing) interest in pornography • Touching other’s genitals without their permission |
| Teenagers (13-18 years) | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masturbate in private • Consenting sexual intercourse with a partner of a similar age and developmental ability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent rubbing or touching of their genitals in public • Accessing content that is sexually explicit (e.g., websites, R18+ movies) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sending sexual images to others that are unwanted • Online pornography use several times per day |

Table adapted from NSW Government (unpublished) and Raising Children Network (2021a)

Where can I find out more about if a sexual behaviour is normal?

Raising Children Network: Offers resources on normal sexual behaviour, as well as problematic and harmful sexual behaviour. Resources are categorised by age of the child or young person.

Sexual Behaviour in Children and Young People (Traffic Lights): Provides information to help guide whether a sexual behaviour is normal, concerning or harmful for different age groups.

A Common Approach to Identification and Support (CAIS) for NSW: provides examples of developmentally typical, problematic and harmful sexual behaviours by age group.

1 Raising Children Network (2020)

2 True Relationships and Reproductive Health (True) (2015)

3 Hackett (2010); Mitchell, Tucci, Fernandes and Howell (2020); NSW Government (unpublished)

4 NSW Government (unpublished)

5 Belton and Hollis (2017); Hackett (2019)

6 Hackett (2014); Hackett, Branigan, & Holmes (2019); NSW Government (unpublished)

7 NSW Government (unpublished); True (2015)

8 Government of South Australia, Department for Child Protection (2020); Life Without Barriers (2022)