

Children and Young People with Concerning and / or Harmful Sexual Behaviours

Information for parents & caregivers

As children grow from babies to adults, they go through different stages. In each stage, the way they feel about their own and other people's bodies changes.

When children are growing up, they are naturally curious about their own bodies and other people's. It is normal for them to want to look and touch. But as they get older there may be some touching that is worrying or harmful to others.

How do I know if my child is sexually harming another child?

It can be difficult to tell the difference between behaviour that is part "expected" and behaviour that is harmful. However, there are some common warning signs.

The following behaviours may be cause for concern:

- Seeking out the company of younger children and spending an unusual amount of time in their company
- Taking younger children to "secret" places or hideaways or playing "special" games with them (eg. Doctor and patient, removing clothing etc), especially games unusual to their age
- Insisting on hugging or kissing a child when the child does not want to
- Telling you they do not want to be alone with a child or becoming anxious when a particular child comes to visit
- Frequently using aggressive or sexual language about adults or children
- Showing sexual materials to younger children
- Sharing sexual images of someone without their consent
- Sharing sexual images of themselves without the recipient being clear that they would like to see them
- Viewing sexual images of children online
- Making sexually abusive telephone calls
- Sharing alcohol or drugs with younger children or teens
- Exposing his or her genitals to younger children
- Forcing sex on another adolescent or child
- Befriending a younger child in order to engage in sexual activity and asking them not to tell
- Having sexual activity with someone who is significantly more drunk than themselves
- Having sexual activity with someone who passively "lets" it happen
- Touching someone's bottom, breasts or crotch area without in-the-moment indications that the touching is desired.

Refer to the information booklet for carer's and professionals "Age appropriate sexual behaviour in children and younger people "

How are you feeling?

It is very normal to have strong feelings when you or your family is going through a difficult time. When you become aware that your child is / has behaved in a problematic sexual way, both you and your child may feel ashamed, embarrassed, guilty, angry, or frightened – or a combination of these. Or you might feel numb and confused about how you should feel.

There is no "right" way to feel, so don't feel guilty about the types of feelings you may be experiencing. It is understandable that you will have strong feelings and these feelings can take time to resolve.

However you feel, remember that you are not alone. Many other people are experiencing these feelings too. There are also hundreds of parents who have had those feelings but are now feeling better, as their family has had to resolve their child's problem behaviour.

Although it's difficult to talk about upsetting topics, it will help you and your child to deal with your feelings if you can discuss them with someone else. Can you talk to your partner, a relative or a trusted friend? Your worker will also be able to help – he or she has met many other families who are going through a difficult time.

Remember that your worker is there to help you with any difficulties you are having.

Talking about the behaviour

Talking about very personal subjects, such as sex or not-ok touching, is very difficult.

This may be one of the hardest things you ever have to go through as a parent. You may feel embarrassed or ashamed. But it is an important part of your job as a parent to make sure that your child learns all the correct information he or she needs to keep him or herself and others safe.

If you don't talk to your child about sex, he or she will still learn about it anyway, from other people such as friends or at school. They may hear information that is inaccurate. As a parent, you can separate the facts from the myths. And if you don't talk to your child about sex, you may give your child the wrong message that sex is scary or dirty.

So however difficult it is, you need to talk to your child about personal things.

There is no "right way" to introduce the subject. Here are some suggestions which we have learned from our work with families.

- Start talking to your child about her or his body from a young age. You don't have to say too much – keep it simple and to-the-point. Children are curious about their bodies from around the age of four. They will ask questions – answer them!
- You don't have to tell them everything in one go
- Many parents find it helps to look at leaflets or books on this topic together with their child.
- Ask your child what he or she already knows about sex. This will help you find out what they already know (or think they know) – as well as showing them it's ok to discuss the subject.
- Ensure you and your child use the correct names for body parts.
- Make sure you know the facts about sex and growing up yourself, so you can teach your child the facts, not myths. If you are confused about any issues, ask your worker.
- If your child ask you a question and you don't know the answer, don't guess or make something up. Tell him or her that you don't know and will find out.
- If your child is uncomfortable with talking about sex or doesn't feel ready, then stop and bring the subject again at a later date. Do not push your child but let them know you are there when they are ready to talk.
- Make sure your child knows about puberty and the physical and emotional changes he or she will go through before talking about sex.
- Be open and honest with your child. Try to be accepting of your child's views even if they are different from yours
- Think about the way you learned about sex yourself as you were growing up. What did you find helpful? How could you adapt this to help your child?
- Your child will be influenced by your behaviour. Ensure the language and behaviour you use at home sets a good example.

When should I seek professional support?

- If you are confused about the problem sexual behaviour, what to do or how to discuss it with your child.
- The behaviour is impacting upon the physical, emotional or social life of your child and family.

- The behaviour continues or escalates despite your attempts to distract your child.
- The child become anxious or fearful when you attempt to intervene in the behaviour.
- The child seems preoccupied with the behaviour.
- The behaviour seems unusual for their age or developmental stage.
- Your child tells you someone has done this to them.
- The child believes the behaviours are problematic for them.

How can SECASA AWARE help you?

AWARE will do an assessment with you and your family. The main areas are:

- To fully identify the nature and extent of the concerning or harmful behaviour
- To identify the needs of the child or young person
- To recommend appropriate interventions to increase safety and concerns

Programmes of intervention

A programme of intervention can follow assessment and could include individual concern and need but includes:

1. Understanding the concerning or harmful sexual behaviour
2. Developing respect and concern for others
3. Taking responsibility for your behaviour
4. Sex education and understanding of appropriate relationships.
5. Developing plans for a future safety
6. Support to parents / carers in dealing with feelings surrounding your child's behaviour

Where to get help?

SECASA Crisis Line (24 Hours)

03 9594 2289

secasa@monashhealth.org

DHHS Child Protection – Southern Region

1300 65 795

DHHS Child Protection – After Hours

13 12 78

Additional sources of information

Age appropriate sexual behaviour in children and young people – Information Booklet for Carers and Professionals June 2018

SECASA

www.secasa.com.au

E-Safety Commission website

esafety.gov.au