



## CHILDREN'S SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR\*

At the Windsor Essex Child/Youth Advocacy Centre (WECYAC) we believe that a child who has been abused should only have to tell their story once. We use a collaborative approach to investigations that includes the expertise of child protection workers and police officers. They meet with the child/youth at our centre to give them the opportunity to provide their statement. After the statement has been provided, WECYAC uses its referral networks to help provide the child/youth with the opportunity to recover after the abuse.

The sexual behaviour of children/youth develops over time. Like other areas of growth, children's ideas and behaviours regarding sexuality develop and typically follow a specific course. However, there are behaviours at certain junctures that can be worrisome, and some that warrant the need to seek professional help. This overview provides a description of sexual behaviours that are typical of specific age-groups of children/youth, explains those behaviours that are worrisome, and describes behaviours that may require professional help.

Sexual behaviours are concerning when there is a notable difference in age, intellectual/developmental functioning or size between the children/adolescents involved, and when threats, force and/or violence are used to involve others in the behaviour(s) or keep them from disclosing. Parents, caregivers, and service providers, should be aware of these behaviours in order to be prepared to adequately address specific behaviours to help keep children safe.

The charts below look at sexual behaviours that are common in:

1. Toddlers and Preschoolers,
2. School-aged Children, and
3. Adolescence

The behaviours described in the charts do not take into account cultural or religious beliefs and values of diverse communities. Further research and/or consultation is required to better understand values, beliefs, traditions and family roles within any specific cultural group. It is essential to challenge our own assumptions, avoid generalizations, and instead work to build genuine trust, rapport and understanding. (Refer to Cultural Competency Manual on website [www.wecyac.ca](http://www.wecyac.ca))



## SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR IN TODDLERS AND PRESCHOOLERS

TYPE OF BEHAVIOUR	OKAY	WORRISOME	SEEK HELP
Curiosity Behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asks questions about sex (e.g., “Where do babies come from?”).</li> <li>Children learn names of body parts, including genitalia.</li> <li>Explores differences between females and males.</li> <li>Interested in having/birthing a baby.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shows fear when talking about sexual topics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Persistently asks questions about sex.</li> <li>Has too much knowledge about sex for age group and stage of development.</li> </ul>
Self-Exploration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likes to be naked.</li> <li>Has erections.</li> <li>Is curious and enjoys exploring own body.</li> <li>Touches own genitals as self-soothing behaviour (e.g., when going to sleep, feeling sick, tense or afraid).</li> <li>Aware of genital area during toilet training.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-stimulates on furniture, toys and uses objects to self-stimulate.</li> <li>Imitates sexual behaviour with dolls or toys.</li> <li>Continues to self-stimulate in public after being told that this behaviour should take place in private.</li> <li>Puts something in genitals or buttocks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chooses to self-stimulate in public or private instead of engaging in other activities.</li> <li>Excessively self-stimulates in private.</li> <li>Self-stimulates on other people.</li> <li>Harms own genitals, buttocks.</li> </ul>
Bathroom, toileting and sexual functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interested in urination and bowel movements.</li> <li>Curious about and tries to see what</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spreads feces purposefully.</li> <li>Urinate in places they shouldn’t.</li> <li>Often caught watching others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keeps on spreading feces.</li> <li>Continues to urinate in places they shouldn’t.</li> <li>Does not allow others privacy in</li> </ul>

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	<p>people are doing in the bathroom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May want privacy in the bathroom and when changing.</li> <li>• Uses inappropriate words for toileting and sexual functions.</li> </ul>	<p>who want privacy in the bathroom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continues to use inappropriate words even after being asked not to.</li> </ul>	<p>the bathroom or bedroom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not care about the rules set for inappropriate language and continues to use it.</li> </ul>
Behaviour with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explores the bodies of other children when playing.</li> <li>• If people are naked, the child likes to look and wants to touch genitals to see what they feel like.</li> <li>• May show their genitals or buttocks to others.</li> <li>• May take off clothes in front of others.</li> <li>• Sees these behaviours as fun and silly.</li> <li>• Plays house with other children.</li> <li>• Kisses and hugs people who are important to them.</li> <li>• May share what they have found out about sex.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continues to play games like “doctor” after asked not to.</li> <li>• Always wants to touch other people.</li> <li>• Tries to do adult sexual behaviours.</li> <li>• Copies adult sexual activity with clothes on.</li> <li>• When talks about adult relationships, refers to sex a lot.</li> <li>• Afraid of being kissed or hugged.</li> <li>• Talks or acts in a sexual way with others.</li> <li>• Uses sexual language even after asked not to.</li> <li>• Talks about sex or engages in play about sex instead of doing other things.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forces, bullies other children to take their clothes off or do sexual things.</li> <li>• Sad, angry, or aggressive scenes between people is shown in dramatic play.</li> <li>• Demands to see the genitals of other children or adults.</li> <li>• Tricks or forces other children into touching, genitals, adult sexual behaviours, copying sexual acts with clothes off, oral sex.</li> <li>• Imitates adult sexual behaviour in detail.</li> <li>• Sexual behaviour with other children involves secrecy.</li> <li>• Talks in a sexual way even with</li> </ul>



			<p>people they do not know.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical contact with others causes anxiety.</li> <li>• Being touched causes fear.</li> </ul>
Behaviour with animals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curious about how animals have babies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Touches genitals of animals, even after being asked not to.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexual behaviour with animals.</li> </ul>



## SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

Type of behaviour	Okay	Worrisome	Get Help
Behaviour with others/relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thinks children of the opposite gender are “gross.”</li> <li>• Chases children of the opposite sex.</li> <li>• Talks about sex with friends, talks about having a romantic relationship.</li> <li>• Older children play games with peers about sex.</li> <li>• Likes telling and listening to dirty jokes.</li> <li>• May begin to explore websites, apps, etc. with sexual content.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refuses contact with specific individual(s).</li> <li>• Uses sexual language to insult or scare others.</li> <li>• Romanticizes all relationships.</li> <li>• Wants to play games related to sex with younger or older children.</li> <li>• Continues to tell dirty jokes after asked not to.</li> <li>• Makes sexual sounds at inappropriate times.</li> <li>• May self-produce, send, respond to sexual images, text messages.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hurts and/or avoids certain types of people (e.g., people of a gender identity different from their own, people with certain features such as facial hair).</li> <li>• Cannot seem to stop talking about sex and sexual acts, even after asked not to.</li> <li>• Sees all relationships in a sexual way.</li> <li>• Forces others to play sexual games.</li> <li>• Continues to tell dirty jokes even after being disciplined.</li> </ul>
Nature of sexual awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Includes genitals on drawings of people.</li> <li>• Looks at pictures of naked people (e.g., magazines, online).</li> <li>• Makes fun of people with a gender identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Genitals are a main feature in pictures, or are larger than the rest of the body parts.</li> <li>• Overly-curious with pictures of naked people.</li> <li>• Becomes very upset when</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drawings may include adult sexual activity, sexual abuse of a child.</li> <li>• Hates own genitals.</li> <li>• Demands privacy in an aggressive or overly upset way.</li> </ul>



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	<p>different from their own.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shows that they want privacy respected.</li> </ul>	<p>privacy is not respected.</p>	
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Adapted from Johnson, T. *Understanding Children's Behaviours, What's Natural and Healthy*, 2015.

## ADOLESCENT SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

TYPE OF BEHAVIOUR	OKAY	WORRISOME	GET HELP
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sexual conversations with peers.</li> <li>Sexual jokes within the cultural norm.</li> <li>Plays games with sexual themes (e.g., spin the bottle).</li> <li>Interested in having a romantic relationship with another person.</li> <li>Sexual preference emerges.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Embarrasses peers with sexual themes (especially if aggressive).</li> <li>Wants to play games with sexual themes with individuals who are outside the legal age of consent (age 16).</li> <li>Acts overtly sexual/seductive to gain status among peers.</li> <li>Refuses contact with a specific individual(s).</li> <li>Makes sexual noises or gestures at inappropriate times.</li> <li>Violates others' body space; overreacts when own boundaries are violated.</li> <li>Develops risky online relationships and behaviours (e.g., with those outside</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Degrades or humiliates others with sexual comments.</li> <li>Forces peers to play sexual games.</li> <li>Sexually aggressive manner.</li> <li>Feels unsafe in a relationship.</li> <li>Sexually focused conversation with an individual(s) outside of the legal age of consent.</li> </ul>

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		the legal age of consent).	
Sexual interests/activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interest in erotica (e.g., magazines and movies).</li> <li>• Sexual fantasies used to create arousal or to prepare for a sexual encounter.</li> <li>• Private masturbation.</li> <li>• Mutual masturbation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pornographic interest.</li> <li>• Preoccupied with sexual thoughts/anxieties.</li> <li>• Voyeurism (i.e., practice of being sexually aroused while watching others undress or engage in sexual acts, also known as “peeping tom”).</li> <li>• Exposes oneself (e.g., “mooning” or “flashing”).</li> <li>• Sexual fantasies involving children.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preoccupation with [violent] adult pornography.</li> <li>• Compulsive masturbation (especially in public, or when directed to stop and disregards direction, or if harmful to oneself).</li> <li>• Obsessive thoughts about sexual activities.</li> <li>• Attempts to expose others’ genitals.</li> </ul>
Sexual Acts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consensual activities such as hugging, kissing, holding hands.</li> <li>• Foreplay involving “making out” and fondling.</li> <li>• Consensual intercourse in the context of a romantic or dating relationship.</li> <li>• Interested in learning about/obtaining methods of birth control.</li> <li>• Inquires about sexually</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promiscuity (i.e., indiscriminate sexual activity with more than one partner during the same period of time).</li> <li>• Engages in high-risk sexual behaviour (e.g., unprotected sex, sexual activity while using alcohol or illicit substances).</li> <li>• Participates in Xrated online spaces (e.g., chat rooms, apps).</li> <li>• Sends naked/provocative pictures of oneself</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coerces others to engage in sexual activity without their consent.</li> <li>• Sexual contact with animals.</li> <li>• Engages in activity in exchange for money, goods, drugs/alcohol.</li> <li>• Sends naked/provocative pictures of oneself or others for malicious intent (e.g., for the purpose of selling photos; distributing for a vindictive reason).</li> </ul>

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	<p>transmitted infections (STIs).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of online spaces (e.g., chat rooms, apps).</li> </ul>	<p>or others (e.g., online, text messaging, sexting).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engages in discussions about sex with people online that they have only met online.</li> <li>• Provides personal information to an individual(s) online and/or arranges to meet in person.</li> <li>• Becomes secretive/overly protective about their technological and/or online activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participates in adults only online dating sites.</li> <li>• Meets face-to-face with someone they have only met online.</li> <li>• Views and/or distributes child abuse media.</li> <li>• Participates in technology-assisted abuse/exploitation.</li> </ul>
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Adapted from Family Planning Queensland, *Sexual Behaviours in Children & Young People: A guide to identify, understand, and respond to Sexual Behaviours, 2012*, <http://www.wbsass.com.au/themes/default/basemedia/content/files/Traffic-LightsBrochure.pdf>. For the “Worrisome” and “Get Help” behaviours related to technology and the internet that may appear in school-aged children, see the *Adolescent Sexual Behaviour* charts.