



INFORMATION SHEET 10



# Understanding children's sexual behaviour

INFORMATION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PROFESSIONALS

Children reach developmental milestones at different times and stages, depending on their age and level of development. Just as they reach important physical and emotional milestones, such as learning to walk or talk, children learn how to recognise, experience, and feel about their bodies, and form attachments to others.

When children explore and learn through play and relationships, their behaviour is considered healthy developmentally when interacting with other children who are similar in age, size, status and ability. Characteristics of healthy sexual behaviour in children include being spontaneous, curious, light-hearted, mutual and consensual.

It is also important to remember that all children develop differently. Sometimes, children may need guidance on what is appropriate, depending on their age and ability to understand. Some children require ongoing guidance.

As a mandatory reporter, it is important that you understand typical sexual development in young children, to enable you to identify and respond to healthy sexual behaviours and those that may be of concern, or harmful.

## What are healthy sexual behaviours?

Healthy sexual behaviours vary, depending on a child's age and stage of development.

### Ages 0 — 5

- Children at this age have intense curiosity about nearly everything, including their bodies.
- Sexual self-stimulation normally begins during infancy, and continues throughout development as both a self-soothing and an exciting behaviour.
- By pre-school age, children usually know masturbation occurs in private.
- Children at this age are also curious about other's bodies. They may try to look at, or touch, others' genitalia. This exploratory looking and touching is typically accompanied by giggling and amusement, rather than behaviour of a coercive nature.
- When limits are clearly explained, children understand what is appropriate and what is not.
- Pre-schoolers are not usually concerned with modesty and may enjoy being naked.



### Ages 6 — 10

- Children this age begin to ask questions about sex, and look for books and diagrams that explain their own organs and functions.
- At this age, curiosity about sexuality takes the form of playing games such as “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours”.
- Children become interested in sex words and dirty jokes.
- Children may hear about sexual matters from their friends and repeat the words they hear, even if they don’t understand the meaning of the words or actions.
- Interest in children’s own and others’ bodies continues during this time, particularly if their bodies begin to change.
- Children become conscious of needing privacy.
- Sex play may include kissing games, saying slang words or pretending to be married.

It is important to recognise when children’s sexual behaviours are outside of what is considered healthy. If their sexual development includes behaviours that are concerning or harmful to themselves or others, it could indicate that they have experienced sexual abuse.

### What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse occurs when an adult, or older or stronger child (including a sibling) uses their power or authority to involve a child in sexual activity. Common traits in the sexual abuse of children include secrecy and coercion.

Children are unlikely to make false disclosures. More often, they will either not tell someone, or they will deny an incident of child sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse can be physical, verbal or emotional, and can include:

- kissing or holding a child in a sexual manner
- exposing a sexual body part to a child
- having sexual relations with a child under 16 years of age
- talking in a sexually explicit or obscene way, that is not age or developmentally appropriate
- persistently intruding on a child’s privacy
- showing pornographic films, magazines or photographs to a child
- forcing a child to watch or engage in a sexual act
- child prostitution.

### Indicators of child sexual abuse

Some indicators of child sexual abuse may include:

- displaying greater sexual knowledge than normally expected for their age or developmental level
- inappropriate play and behaviour with themselves, other children, or dolls and toys
- hints about sexual activity through actions or comments that are inappropriate to the child’s age or developmental level
- persistent sexual themes in their drawings or play time
- creating stories, poems or artwork about abuse
- recurring themes of power or control in play.

If you observe behaviours that are concerning or harmful, it is important not to probe the child for information. Instead, ask general non-intrusive questions before deciding who to contact for advice.

## Further information

For information about child abuse and child sexual abuse, go to:

### Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services

Web: [www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety/protecting-children](http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety/protecting-children)

Download the following resources:

- Child sexual abuse — things you need to know*
- Child abuse — what you need to know*

For information about understanding children's sexual behaviours, go to:

### TRUE Relationships and Reproductive Health

Web: website [www.true.org.au](http://www.true.org.au)

Download the following resources:

- Sexual behaviours in children and young people* (Traffic Lights ®)
- Sexual development in early childhood*
- Traffic Lights ® App

## Who do I talk to if I have concerns about a child?

If you are unsure about what to do if you have concerns about a child's behaviour, you can:

- talk about your concerns with your work colleagues
- refer to the **Child Protection Guide**. Go to [www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety](http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety) and search for 'child protection guide'
- call **Family and Child Connect** on **13 FAMILY** or **13 32 64** for information and advice

- call **Child Safety** if you have formed a reasonable suspicion that a child has suffered, is suffering, or is at unacceptable risk of suffering significant harm caused by physical or sexual abuse, and there is not a parent willing and able to protect the child from harm:
  - Brisbane: ph. 1300 682 254
  - South East Queensland: ph. 1300 679 849
  - South West Queensland: ph. 1300 683 390
  - North Coast: ph. 1300 703 921
  - North Queensland: ph. 1300 706 147
  - Central Queensland: ph. 1300 703 762
  - Far North Queensland: ph. 1300 684 062
  - Child Safety After Hours Service Centre: ph. 1800 177 135 or 3235 9999