Identifying and responding to problematic sexual behaviours

Scenarios

Cassie, 7 years, regularly masturbates in class. She has been spoken to about her behaviour and the frequency does reduce for a short period of time. However some days she is constantly masturbating and other children around her notice this and are either uncomfortable or make fun of her.

Kai, 10 years, is constantly looking up girls’ uniforms and crawling under desks to do this. He has been spoken to about this behaviour, he says he is just joking and playing a game, however the girls in his class are getting annoyed with his behaviour.
Identifying and responding to problematic sexual behaviours

Case study

Nico, aged 5, hides behind the equipment shed (or other buildings in school), pulls down other boys’ pants and his own. There have been attempts to redirect his behaviour but it does not seem to stop him. He gets angry when he is spoken to about this.

Yesterday he pulled down the pants of another boy, pulled down his own pants and told him to touch his private parts and “not tell”.

Questions

What action do you take to:

1. protect and reassure the child or young person who has been harmed
2. respond to the child or young person who has harmed
3. manage the incident
4. support and protect other children or young people who may have been harmed
5. communicate with parents?
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Scenarios

**Lily**, 12 years, is observed on Monday morning, proudly showing off a large love bite on her neck after being at a weekend party.

**Ben**, 15 years and Rosie 13 years, have a close sibling relationship, always looking out for each other and for their younger siblings. Both their parents have a long history of alcohol misuse and there has been involvement with a range of services over the years, including all the children having short stays in care. Rosie’s friend has come to see you as she is worried because Rosie told her that Ben gives her money if she lets him touch her private parts.
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Case study

There is a commotion in the corridor, and there is a group of Year 9 students gathered around. One of the girls tells you that Rob, also in Year 9, has just ‘attacked’ Mira, pushing her up against a wall and touching her private parts. Mira is quite distressed and is being comforted by her friends. Rob has left the scene.

Questions

What action do you take to:

1. protect and reassure the child or young person who has been harmed
2. respond to the child or young person who has harmed
3. manage the incident
4. support and protect other children or young people who may have been harmed
5. communicate with parents?
3. RESPOND

When you can address to the child’s needs
All behaviour has a function. When adults understand why the behaviour may be occurring, they can respond in ways that
meet the needs of the child or young person in effective ways. Behaviour usually reflects a range of needs. Many strategies
may be required to respond to children with concerning or harmful behaviours. It is also important to address the needs
of parents/caregivers, family, friends, teachers and support workers.

Strategies for meeting the need could include:
• gain accurate facts and information about sexuality
• teach social skills
• support healthy friendships and relationships
• teach about privacy and make home and all
• social environments private and safe
• make clear rules and reinforce them with praise or consequences
• have consistency between home, family, school, community
• supervise during times of risk
• monitor behaviour and review support strategies
• restrict access to previous victims or vulnerable others and
• explain plans to the child
• talk with people who bully or who also show concerning behaviour
• report harm or abuse
• provide information to family, care and services and
• get family counseling or therapy
• refer to other services

Sexual and emotional education
Educational approaches encourage open and 
other communication to provide a foundation for the
development of healthy sexual behaviours and attitudes. 
Topics for education may include:

• reproduction health
• safe sex
• common errors
• personal safety
• sexual abuse
• sexual health
• body image
• sexual functioning
• types of touch
• relationships
• advertisement

Taking action
Most sexual behaviours are normal and healthy and will
be in the grey category. Some light behaviour problems
are normal and will resolve on their own. However,
many children and young people about sexual health.
Orange or red light behaviours are less common. They indicate
the need to pay attention, monitor, supervise, provide sexuality
education and give full permission is taken into account. This includes
the environment in which children grow, develop and interact.
The chart on the next page lists specific examples of green,
children healthy and safe

sexual behaviours that are normal, age appropriate, spontaneous,
and behaviours that are outside normal behaviour in terms
of persistence, frequency or inequality in age, power or ability
and others involved as well as the location, frequency and
behaviours. When using the traffic lights framework to
establish whether the sexual behaviour of children or young
people is normal, concerning or harmful. It is important to
consider the current social, cultural and context.

The chart on the next page lists specific examples of green,
orange and red light behaviours at various ages. These are
examples only and must be considered in context. Take into
account the age and level of the child, young person and
others involved as well as the location, frequency and

1. IDENTIFY

Knowing how to identify and respond to sexual behaviours in children and young people helps adults to support the development of healthy

ournals, frequency or inequalities in age, power or ability

child’s relationships and relates to the stage of development.

Sexual behaviours are not just about sex. They include any


Melbourne: Victorian Government

Children and young people who have a disability, have been
abused or have experienced other difficulties to their
development or disabilities, may be at increased risk of
exposure to or vulnerability in sexual, non-consensual or harmful
sexual behaviours. Adults who care for these young people have a
obligation to provide relevant information and support,

2010 Sexual Behaviours in Children and Young People: A guide to IDENTIFY, UNDERSTAND and RESPOND to sexual behaviours

by Role, Sex, Relationship Status, Age, Intellectual Ability, Gender and

What is the behaviour? green, orange or red?

Dream development is influenced by many factors.

behavioral and psychological mechanisms. It may result in the

to address the need to pay attention, monitor, supervise, provide sexuality
education and give full permission is taken into account. This includes

Taking action

all sexual behaviors that are normal, age appropriate, spontaneous,
and others involved as well as the location, frequency and

WHERE TO GET HELP

Talking about concerns helps prevent harm or abuse

Parent/Carer: 000 30 1200

Lifeline: 13 11 14

Child Safety Services (NSW): 1800 177 172

Child Care Protection or Police Services in your state or territory if a child or adult requires protection from harm.

1. Harry, aged 6, masturbates for most of the day at school.

2. Tanya, aged 12, speaks a lot of time talking in the bedroom.

3. Gayle, aged 12, often tries to sit on the lap of her mum’s

4. Alex, aged 6, spends lots of time chatting to friends on

5. Marley and Ashmita, both aged 4, are playing in the cubby

6. Ayesha, aged 16, is overheard telling her close friends about

7. Tilly, aged 16, is overheard telling her close friends about

For more information about other traffic lights resources and training context, contact us at:

Phone: 07 3250 0240

www.fpq.com.au
What the behaviour is telling you

Children show their need and want through their behaviour. Understanding the reason behind a child's actions can help us know how to best care for them. If you are concerned about any child, talk to a professional or trusted adult that can carefully interpret the meaning to the behaviour.

When sexual behaviour is identified as concerning or harmful, it is crucial to think about why the child is behaving in this way and the ways in which it is impacting their development and the way it happens will well you understand what is going on for the child and their circumstances.

Q1. What are the issues or concerns regarding the child or young person and their behaviour?

2. UNDERSTAND

2.1 RED

Sexual behaviour which indicates that adult action or intervention is required

- excessive, compulsive, coercive, forceful, inappropriate to the age and stage of development
- inappropriate touching of the sexual organs or other body parts
- activities or play in sexual or explicit contexts
- activities or play of a sexual nature
- explicit, unconsensual sexual activity
- sexual grooming or sexual overexposure to explicit sexual activity and materials
- conflict in relationships
- massacre, bullying
- social exclusion, inability or powerlessness

2.2 ORANGE

Sexual behaviour which sometimes indicate that adult action or intervention may be appropriate

- masturbation in preference to other activities
- preoccupation with sexualisation
- persistent oversexuality
- following others into private spaces
- touching the genitals/private parts
- persistent oversexuality or engaging in sexual activity
- curiosity and seeking information about sexuality
- frequent asking of questions or desire to talk about sex
- interest in body parts and functions
- physical or sexual abuse
- sexual abuse
- inappropriate attention or inappropria

2.3 GREEN

Sexual behaviour which are part of normal and healthy development

- comfort in being nude
- body language showing developing self concept, self-esteem, and self respect
- socialisation
- participation in development
- exploration of surroundings
- chatting about sex
- telling stories or asking questions, using new words or names for private parts
- use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with known peers

Q2. What might these concerns indicate?

- curiosity about other parts of life
- curiosity about other children’s genitals
- masturbation
- increased sense of privacy about bodies
- explicit, unconsensual sexual activity
- sexual grooming
- social exclusion, inability or powerlessness
- socialisation
- participate in make believe games involving pretend sexual activity
- curiosity about sexuality
- explicit communications, art or actions which may indicate giving out identifying details
- arranged meeting with an online acquaintance
- explicit sexual conversations and/or exploitation materials
- explicit sexual conversations and/ or publishing sexual images of another person without their consent
- sexual grooming or sexual overexposure to explicit sexual activity
- use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with known peers
- more than two years age difference or with different age, developmental ability and/or other sex
- explicit sexual conversations and/or exploitation materials
- explicit sexual conversations and/ or publishing sexual images of another person without their consent
- sexual grooming or sexual overexposure to explicit sexual activity
- use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with known peers
- explicit sexual conversations and/or exploitation materials
- explicit sexual conversations and/ or publishing sexual images of another person without their consent
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