



# Stop It Now!®

Together We Can Prevent the Sexual Abuse of Children

## PREVENTION TOOLS

Have questions?

Need resources?

**Get Help Now!**

Online Help Center  
<http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>

**Stop It Now!** prevents the sexual abuse of children by mobilizing adults, families and communities to take actions that protect children before they are harmed.

### Age-Appropriate Sexual Behavior

It can be hard to acknowledge that all of us, even children, are sexual beings, have sexual feelings and are curious about sex and sexuality. Children's curiosity can lead to exploring their own and each other's body parts by looking and touching.

They may peek when family members are in the bathroom or changing clothes or try to listen outside the bedroom. They may look at magazines, books, videos, and on the internet.

It can be hard to tell the difference between "normal" sexual behaviors and behaviors that are signs that a child may be developing a problem. Sexual play that is more typical or expected in children will more often have the following traits:

- The sexual play is between children who have an ongoing mutually enjoyable play and/or school friendship.
- The sexual play is between children of similar size, age, and social and emotional development.
- It is lighthearted and spontaneous. The children may be giggling and having fun when you discover them.
- When adults set limits (for example, children keep their clothes on at day care), children are able to follow the rules.

### Preschool age (0 to 5 years)

#### Common:

- Will have questions and express knowledge relating to:
  - differences in gender, private body parts,
  - hygiene and toileting,
  - pregnancy and birth.
- Will explore genitals and can experience pleasure.
- Showing and looking at private body parts.

#### Uncommon:

- Having knowledge of specific sexual acts or explicit sexual language.
- Engaging in adult-like sexual contact with other children.

### School-age (6-8 years)

#### Common:

- Will need knowledge and have questions about
  - physical development, relationships, sexual behavior
  - menstruation and pregnancy,
  - personal values.
- Experiment with same-age and same gender children, often during games or role-playing.
- Self stimulation in private is expected to continue.



### Uncommon:

- Adult-like sexual interactions,
- Having knowledge of specific sexual acts,
- Behaving sexually in a public place or through the use of phone or internet technology.

### School-age (9-12 years)

Hormonal changes and external influences, such as peers, media and Internet, will increase sexual awareness, feelings and interest at the onset of puberty.

### Common:

- Will need knowledge and have questions about
  - Sexual materials and information,
  - Relationships and sexual behavior,
  - Using sexual words and discussing sexual acts and personal values, particularly with peers.
- Increased experimentation with sexual behaviors and romantic relationships.
- Self stimulation in private is expected to continue.

### Uncommon:

- Regularly occurring adult-like sexual behavior .
- Behaving sexually in a public place.

### Adolescence (13 to 16)

### Common:

- Will need information and have questions about
  - Decision making
  - Social relationships and sexual customs
  - Personal values and consequences of sexual behavior.
- Self stimulation in private is expected to continue.
- Girls will begin menstruation; boys will begin to produce sperm.
- Sexual experimentation between adolescents of the same age and gender is common.
- Voyeuristic behaviors are common in this age group.
- First sexual intercourse will occur for approximately one third of teens.

### Uncommon:

- Masturbation in a public place.
- Sexual interest directed toward much younger children.

For more information and guidance about sexual behaviors in children, please visit our Online Help Center, <http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>.

### Resources on Age-Appropriate Sexual Behavior

- **Understanding Your Child's Sexual Behavior**, Toni Cavanaugh Johnson
- **Childhood Sexuality: A Guide for Parents**, Gail Ryan and Joanne Blum
- **From Diapers to Dating: A Parents Guide to Raising Sexually Healthy Children**, Debra Haffner
- **A Very Touching Book: For Little People and Big People**, Jan Hindman



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### **Warning Signs in Children and Adolescents of Possible Child Sexual Abuse**

Any one sign doesn't mean that a child was sexually abused, but the presence of several suggests that you begin asking questions and consider seeking help. Keep in mind that some of these signs can emerge at other times of stress such as:

- During a divorce
- Death of a family member or pet
- Problems at school or with friends
- Other anxiety-inducing or traumatic events

### **Behavior you may see in a child or adolescent**

- Has nightmares or other sleep problems without an explanation
- Seems distracted or distant at odd times
- Has a sudden change in eating habits
  - Refuses to eat
  - Loses or drastically increases appetite
  - Has trouble swallowing.
- Sudden mood swings: rage, fear, insecurity or withdrawal
- Leaves "clues" that seem likely to provoke a discussion about sexual issues
- Writes, draws, plays or dreams of sexual or frightening images
- Develops new or unusual fear of certain people or places
- Refuses to talk about a secret shared with an adult or older child
- Talks about a new older friend
- Suddenly has money, toys or other gifts without reason
- Thinks of self or body as repulsive, dirty or bad
- Exhibits adult-like sexual behaviors, language and knowledge

### **Signs more typical of younger children**

- An older child behaving like a younger child (such as bed-wetting or thumb sucking)
- Has new words for private body parts
- Resists removing clothes when appropriate times (bath, bed, toileting, diapering)
- Asks other children to behave sexually or play sexual games
- Mimics adult-like sexual behaviors with toys or stuffed animal
- Wetting and soiling accidents unrelated to toilet training



### Signs more typical in adolescents

- Self-injury (cutting, burning)
- Inadequate personal hygiene
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Sexual promiscuity
- Running away from home
- Depression, anxiety
- Suicide attempts
- Fear of intimacy or closeness
- Compulsive eating or dieting

### Physical warning signs

Physical signs of sexual abuse are rare. If you see these signs, bring your child to a doctor. Your doctor can help you understand what may be happening and test for sexually transmitted diseases.

- Pain, discoloration, bleeding or discharges in genitals, anus or mouth
- Persistent or recurring pain during urination and bowel movements
- Wetting and soiling accidents unrelated to toilet training

### What You Can Do If You See Warning Signs

- Create a [Safety Plan](#). Don't wait for "proof" of child sexual abuse.
- Look for patterns of behavior that make children less safe. Keep track of behaviors that concern you. This [Sample Journal Page](#) can be a helpful tool.
- See our [Let's Talk Guidebook](#) for tips on speaking up whenever you have a concern.
- If you have questions or would like resources or guidance for responding to a specific situation, visit our [Online Help Center](#), <http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>.

Remember, the most effective prevention takes place before there's a child victim to heal or an offender to punish.

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### ***Behaviors to Watch for When Adults Are With Children***

We all have personal likes and things that make us uncomfortable. "Personal space" is the private area of control inside an imaginary line or boundary that defines each person as separate. Ideally, that boundary helps us stay in charge of our own personal space. It helps keep out the things that make us uncomfortable - unsafe and unwanted feelings, words, images, and physical contact. Solid social rules strengthen the boundary. Behaviors that routinely disrespect or ignore boundaries make children vulnerable to abuse.

Do you know an adult or older child who doesn't seem to understand what's acceptable when it comes to:

#### **Personal space**

- Makes others uncomfortable by ignoring social, emotional or physical boundaries or limits?
- Refuses to let a child set any of his or her own limits? Uses teasing or belittling language to keep a child from setting a limit?
- Insists on hugging, touching, kissing, tickling, wrestling with or holding a child even when the child does not want this physical contact or attention?
- Frequently walks in on children/teens in the bathroom?

#### **Relationships with children**

- Turns to a child for emotional or physical comfort by sharing personal or private information or activities, normally shared with adults?
- Has secret interactions with teens or children (e.g. games, sharing drugs, alcohol, or sexual material) or spends excessive time emailing, text messaging or calling children or youth?
- Insists on or manages to spend uninterrupted time alone with a child?
- Seems "too good to be true, i.e. frequently babysits different children for free; takes children on special outings alone; buys children gifts or gives them money for no apparent reason?
- Allows children or teens to consistently get away with inappropriate behaviors?

#### **Sexual conversation or behavior**

- Frequently points out sexual images or tells dirty or suggestive jokes with children present?
- Exposes a child to adult sexual interactions or images without apparent concern?
- Is overly interested in the sexuality of a particular child or teen (e.g., talks repeatedly about the child's developing body or interferes with normal teen dating)?

Good boundaries help prevent abuse. For more information and guidance about starting a conversation with someone who behaves in these ways, please visit our Online Help Center, <http://GetHelp.StopItNow.org>

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