

What is problematic and harmful sexual behaviour?

FOR CARERS



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Problematic and harmful sexual behaviour (PHSB) is behaviour displayed by kids under 18 years of age. This behaviour:

- is outside what is culturally accepted as developmentally typical
- may be compulsive, obsessive, coercive, aggressive, secretive or violent
- might involve a substantial difference in the age or developmental ability of those involved
- can be harmful to those displaying the behaviour or other.

Normal or developmentally appropriate sexual behaviours

Many kids engage in sexual behaviours, including sexual play and exploration, as a normal part of their development. These behaviours are typically:

- non-coercive
- spontaneous
- mutual, causing no emotional distress
- easily redirected by an adult
- based on age-appropriate knowledge, curiosity and exploration.

Spectrum of behaviours

Sexual behaviours fall across a spectrum of age-appropriate, concerning and very concerning.

Age-appropriate sexual behaviours - behaviours that are developmentally normal and expected.

Concerning sexual behaviours - behaviours outside what is developmentally expected, which may be persistent or frequent, and are likely to place kids at risk.

Very concerning behaviours - behaviours that may be compulsive or involve victimisation, and place those displaying them or others at risk of physical or psychological harm.

You've Got This!

LINKS Training and Support

Age Appropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning
Easily redirected	Persistent / does not respond to redirection	Persistent / does not respond to redirection
Non-coercive / consensual	Does not respect personal boundaries	Uses bribery and / or coercion
Spontaneous	Preoccupation with behaviour	May use planning or secrecy
Intermittent	Increased frequency	Intrusive
Behaviour is with same aged peers	Behaviour may be with similar aged peers	Large age or developmental difference (more than two years)
Those involved typically feel safe	May cause anxiety, fear or shame	Causes physical or psychological harm
Does not use force, intimidation, <u>aggression</u> or violence	Does not use force, intimidation, aggression or violence	Threatens or uses force, intimidation, aggression or violence
Does not interfere with development	May not interfere with development	Interferes with development
Displays age-appropriate sexual knowledge or behaviours which may be displayed through sexual play	Displays knowledge or behaviours that may be inappropriate for age	Displays knowledge or behaviours well beyond what is expected for age

Risk factors for PHSB

Childhood trauma is a significant risk factor for kids developing PHSB. Traumatic experiences may include:

- physical and/or sexual abuse
- domestic violence
- parental drug and alcohol abuse
- exposure to a highly sexualised environment or sexually explicit material such as pornography
- long term neglect and inadequate supervision
- unstable care arrangements or homelessness.

The majority of kids in out-of-home-care have experienced multiple and complex traumas. A child's trauma experiences can increase their risk of developing PHSB. However, most children who have experienced trauma do not develop behaviours of concern.

Why do kids display PHSB?

There are many reasons why kids display PHSB. This may be due to:

- curiosity
- exploration
- imitation
- attention-seeking
- self-soothing.

Adolescents might also display PHSB to gain sexual gratification.

Behaviour is often shaped by environments and experiences. PHSB may develop when kids:

- have difficulty understanding and developing relationships
- are modelling the power and control they have experienced
- try to regain command of their lives and environments

How to Respond

If you are concerned that PHSB is occurring in your household, you have the power to make a difference. It is important to speak to your caseworker about your concerns and the steps you should take. Consider completing a Sexual Behaviour Identification Sheet to assist with this conversation.

You can access further information about PHSB, and the Sexual Behaviour Identification Sheet, at <https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/children-and-families/links-training-and-support.html>