

Parenting *ideas* INSIGHTS

Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Michael Grose

Is it normal? Dealing with sexual behaviours in children and young people.



Every parent wants their children to grow up with a healthy and open attitude to their sexuality. You can support this by being able to identify, understand and respond to your children's sexual behaviours.

Displays of any form of sexual behaviour in a child or young person can be highly confronting for a parent. Most parents struggle with having the basic 'birds and bees' conversation with their children, let alone trying to work out which behaviours are 'normal' and which are something to worry about.

It's important to understand that some level of sexual behaviour – which includes everything from questions about sexuality and relationships to touching and fondling – is quite normal, even from quite young ages. Most sexual behaviours are simply expressions of a natural interest in sexuality.

However, that doesn't mean that all of these behaviours are normal or healthy. Parents, teachers and others who care for children and young people need to be able to recognise the signs of potentially harmful sexual behaviours – and they need to know how to respond to these.

Family Planning Queensland (FPQ) has put together a clear guide to managing sexual behaviours in children and young people.

There are three steps involved in management of these behaviours:

1 Identify

Many factors can affect the behaviours exhibited by a particular child, so it's important to consider the child's context, including their social and family situation and the culture in which they have been brought up. It's also important, where some form of sexual behaviour is recognised, to avoid jumping to conclusions or a knee-jerk response.

The FPQ guide includes examples of behaviours regarded as 'green' (normal, age appropriate and spontaneous), 'orange' (outside normal, especially if overly persistent or frequent) and 'red' (problematic or harmful) sexual behaviours at different age levels. Despite the taboo about such things in our society, most sexual behaviours fall into the 'green' category of normal and healthy.

2 Understand

The same applies to a sexual behaviour as any other behaviour in a child or young person: it is a reflection of their needs or

wants. Often, when language and social skills are still nascent, 'acting out' is the only way a child can express themselves.

Understanding a sexual behaviour means trying to get behind what is driving that behaviour. Is it an unsatisfied curiosity, boredom, challenging relationships? Could it be something more serious, such as an indication of abuse or neglect?

The only way to make sure you respond in the most appropriate way is to ensure that you understand before you act.

3 Respond

All sexual behaviours exhibited by a child or young person deserve some sort of action and support – ignoring is not a response.

'Normal' (green) behaviours provide an opening to talk, to explain and to provide support if needed. This might include providing facts (and destroying a myth or two) and assisting with social skills development.

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... Is it normal? Dealing with sexual behaviours in children and young people ...

SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS

RED

Sexual behaviours that maybe harmful, secretive or coercive

Need for adult protection and support

ORANGE

Sexual behaviours that may cause concern due to age, activity or health risk

Need for adult monitoring and extra support

GREEN

Normal, healthy sexual behaviours appropriate to a child's age and developmental stage

Need for adult explanation and education

Traffic lights adapted from Child At Risk Assessment Unit. Age Appropriate Sexual Play ACT

'Beyond normal' (orange) behaviours will often need more intervention, including ongoing monitoring. This could include supervision during times of risk, making stricter rules or removing the child from a potentially harmful situation.

'Harmful' (red) behaviours require an immediate and proactive response that protects the child and any others who may be in danger. Where a law is broken, or where you become aware of, or suspicious of, sexual abuse or the risk of such abuse, reporting to a child protection service or the police is essential.

A pre-emptive response to sexual behavioural problems is education. This is the best way to promote healthy development and open communication. It can take place at any age, and can be one-on-one with a parent or in a classroom situation. Again, topics covered can be much broader than the obvious. They can include 'mechanical' issues including anatomy, practical issues such as handling puberty and managing periods, and serious issues like sexual abuse and safe sex.

Every child and young person has the right to be safe. As a parent, building your awareness of what's normal and what's not when it comes to sexual behaviours – and knowing how to respond appropriately – will help you play a more proactive role in making sure that your children's sexual development is healthy and they are protected from harm or abuse.

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