

Behaviors Related to Sex and Sexuality in Preschool Children

The following chart attempt to be behaviors, which relate to sex and sexuality of preschool children of normal intelligence. Available literature and empirical data on child sexuality have been studied and consultation with hundreds of professionals. Parents and childcare providers have been sought to prepare this chart. It is a first step in defining behaviors related to sex and sexuality, which are within the normal range, behaviors which raise concern and behaviors which require immediate assessment and intervention. This chart is not meant for use in assessment of child sexual abuse. Comments and suggestions are invited by the author.

The behaviors in the first column are those, which are in the normal range. This range is wide and not all children will engage in all of the behaviors, some children may engage in none while some may only do one or two. There will be differences due to the child's interest and the amount of exposure the child has had to adult sexuality, nudity, explicit television, videos and pictures. The child's parent's attitudes and values will influence the child's behaviors.

The second column describes which are seen in some children who are concerned about sexuality, children who lack adequate supervision and other children who have been sexually molested or maltreated. When a child shows several of these behaviors, a consultation with a professional is advised.

The third column describes behaviors which are often indicative of a child who is experiencing deep confusion in the area of sexuality. This child may or may not have been sexually abused or maltreated. It may be that the level of sex and/or aggression in the environment in which the child has lived overwhelmed the child's ability to integrate it and the child is acting out the confusion. Consultation with a professional who specializes in child sexuality or child sexual abuse should be sought.

Sex Play is Within Normal Range of Childhood Behavior

All aspects of normal sex and sexuality for preschool children are related to curiosity and exploration. Preschoolers are trying to find out about the world, how it smells, tastes, works, sounds and feels. Everything related to the genitals, breasts, differences between males and females and procreation are subjects of preschoolers' exploration and curiosity. This interest comes and goes.

Areas of Concern

Concern arises when the child focuses on sexuality to a greater extent than 1) other areas of the child's environment or, 2) other developmentally matched peers. Interest in sex and sexuality should be in balance with the curiosity and exploration of all other aspects of the child's life. When a child is admonished about certain sexual behaviors yet continues, this raises concern. When a child shows no concern for admonitions regarding sexual behaviors also raises concern. If a child shows several behaviors, which are of concern, professional advice is recommended.

When to Seek Professional Help

When there is secrecy, anger, anxiety, tension, fear, coercion, force or compulsive interest and activity related to sex and sexuality professional advice should be sought.

Behaviors Related to Sex and Sexuality in Preschool Children

NORMAL RANGE	OF CONCERN	SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP
Touches/rubs own genitals when diapers are being changed, when going to sleep, when tense, excited or afraid.	Continues to touch/rub genitals in public after being told many times not to do this.	Touches/rubs self in public or in private to the exclusion of normal childhood activities.
Explores differences between males and females, boys and girls.	Continuous questions about genital differences after all questions have been answered.	Play male or female roles in an angry, sad, or aggressive manner. Hates own/other sex.
Touches the genital, breast of familiar adults and children.	Touches the genital, breasts of adults not in family. Asks to be touched himself/herself.	Sneakily touches adults. Makes others allow touching, demands touching self.
Takes advantage of opportunity to look at nude persons.	Stares at nude persons even after having seen many persons nude.	Asks people to take off their clothes. Tries to forcibly undress people.
Asks about the genitals, breasts, intercourse and babies.	Keeps asking people even after parent has answered questions at an age appropriate level.	Asks strangers after parent has answered. Sexual knowledge too great for age.
Erections	Continuous erections.	Painful erections
Likes to be nude. May show others his/her genitals.	Wants to be nude in public after parent has said "no."	Refuses to put on clothes. Secretly shows self in public after many scoldings.
Interested in watching people doing bathroom functions.	Interest in watching bathroom functions does not wane in days/weeks.	Refuses to leave people alone in bathroom, forces way into bathroom.
Interested in having/birthing baby.	Boys interest does not wane after several days/weeks of play about babies.	Displays fear or anger about babies, birthing or intercourse.
Uses "dirty" words for bathroom and sexual functions.	Continues to use "dirty" words at home after parent says "no."	Uses "dirty" words in public and at home after many scoldings.
Interested in own feces.	Smears feces on the walls or floor more than one time.	Repeatedly plays or smears feces after scolding.
Plays doctor inspecting others' bodies.	Frequently plays doctor after being told "no."	Forces child to play doctor, to take off clothes.
Puts something on the genitals or scrotum of self or others due to curiosity or exploration.	Puts something in genitals or rectum of self or other child after being told "no."	Any coercion or force in putting something in genitals or rectum of other child.
Plays house, may simulate all roles of mommy and daddy.	Humping other children with clothes on.	Simulated or real intercourse with another nude child.