



Child's Play?

Preventing Abuse Among Children and Young People

Introduction

As parents and carers, we all want to do the best we can to protect our children, while giving them the freedom they need to develop towards adulthood. Sometimes the world can feel full of risks, some of them understood and others unknown. In order to strike the right balance between protection and independence for our children, we need the best possible information. This leaflet is for everyone involved in bringing up children. It explains that some children do indeed sexually abuse other children, how we can recognise the warning signs and the action we can take to prevent it.

Do children sexually abuse other children?

We are becoming increasingly aware of the risk of sexual abuse that some adults present to our children and there is growing understanding that this risk lies mostly within families and communities. But very few people realise that other children can sometimes present a risk. A third of those who have sexually abused a child are themselves under the age of 18.

This is an especially difficult issue to deal with, partly because it is hard for us to think of children doing such things, but also because it is not always easy to tell the difference between normal sexual exploration and abusive behaviour. Children, particularly in the younger age groups, may engage in such behaviour with no knowledge that it is wrong or abusive. For this reason, it may be more accurate to talk about sexually harmful behaviour rather than abuse.

It is important that we all have the information we need to recognise the warning signs of harmful sexual behaviour at an early stage and seek help. Every adult who cares about children can take responsibility for preventing abuse and ensuring that those involved have the help they need.

What is healthy sexual development?

We all know that children pass through different stages of development as they grow, and that their awareness and curiosity about sexual matters change as they pass from infancy into childhood and then through puberty to adolescence.

Each child is an individual and will develop in his or her own way. However, there is a generally accepted range of behaviours linked to children's age and developmental stage. Sometimes these will involve some exploration with other children of similar age. It can be difficult to tell the difference between age appropriate sexual exploration and warning signs of harmful behaviour. Occasionally we may need to explain to children why we would prefer them not to continue with a particular behaviour. This is a chance to talk with them about keeping themselves and others safe and to let them know that you are someone who will listen.

Disabled children may develop at different rates, depending on the nature of their disability, and they can be more vulnerable to abuse. Children with learning disabilities, for example, may behave sexually in ways that are out of step with their age. Particular care may be needed in education such children to understand their sexual development and to ensure that they can communicate effectively about any worries they have.

It is important to recognise that, while people from different backgrounds have different expectations about what is acceptable behaviour in children, sexual abuse happens across all races and cultures.

The chart below shows some examples of normal and healthy sexual behaviour that we might expect to see in our children as they pass through different stages of development from pre-school to adolescence. Remember that each child develops at his or her own pace and not every child will show all these behaviours. The chart also describes other behaviour that may give cause for concern. If you have any worries or questions about a child you know, talk to someone about it. Your health visitor, GP or child's teacher may be able to help, or you could ring the Stop it Now! Helpline.

What is age-appropriate sexual behaviour?

Pre-school children (0-5 years) commonly:

- Use childish 'sexual' language to talk about body parts
- Ask how babies are made and where they come from
- Touch or rub their own genitals
- Show and look at private body parts

They rarely:

- *Discuss sexual acts or use sexually explicit language*
- *Have physical sexual contact with other children*
- *Show adult-like sexual behaviour or knowledge*

School-age children (6-12 years) commonly:

- Ask questions about menstruation, pregnancy and sexual behaviour
- Experiment with other children, often during games, kissing, touching, showing and role-playing e.g. mums and dads or doctors and nurses
- Masturbate in private

Older children in this age range are also more likely than pre-school children to use sexual words and discuss sexual acts, particularly with their friends

They rarely:

- *Masturbate in public*
- *Show adult-like sexual behaviour or knowledge*

Adolescents (13-16 years) commonly:

- Ask questions about relationships and sexual behaviour
- Use sexual language and talk about sexual acts between themselves
- Masturbate in private
- Experiment sexually with adolescents of similar age
NB. about one-third of adolescents have sexual intercourse before the age of 16.

They rarely:

- *Masturbate in public*
- *Have sexual contact with much younger children or adults*

What is sexually harmful behaviour?

Sexually harmful behaviour by children and young people ranges from experimentation that unintentionally goes too far, through to serious sexual assault. It sometimes involves children as young as four or five, although most of those who sexually harm others are adolescents. Usually, but not always, the child or young person causing the harm is older than the victim. Often victims are uncomfortable or confused about what is happening and may feel that they are willingly involved, but not understand that the behaviour is harmful.

It is important to recognise that our children will engage in some forms of sexual exploration with similar age children. However, any child or young person who engages in sex play with a much younger or more vulnerable child, or who uses force, tricks or bribery to involve someone in sexual activity, is a cause for concern and we should seek help or advice.

“The best way to keep your family safe is to educate yourself about child sexual abuse. The earlier we can see what is happening, the earlier we can do something to stop the abuse.”

- *The mother of a sexually abusing adolescent*

What about child pornography?

As well as the activities described above, we also have to be aware of the serious and growing problem of children and young people downloading sexual images of children on the internet. We do not know what effect looking at such material may have on their sexual and emotional development, but repeated viewing of child or adult pornography is certainly a cause for concern. In addition, downloading child pornography is a criminal offence. Young people who look at this material should be made aware that it is a crime and may need help with their behaviour. It is important that we keep a careful eye on what websites our children are visiting and restrict access as necessary. Further information and links are available on the Stop it Now! website: www.stopitnow.org.uk

Why do some children sexually harm others?

The reasons why children sexually harm others are complicated and not always obvious. Some of them have been emotionally, sexually or physically abused themselves, while others may have witnessed physical or emotional violence at home. For some children it may be a passing phase, but the harm they cause to other children can be serious and some will go on to abuse children into adulthood if they do not receive help. For this reason it is vital to seek advice and help as soon as possible.

“I didn’t have the words to tell my parents what was going on. I said I didn’t want to be left alone with kids. I wish they had listened to me....” - *A sexually abusing adolescent*

How can we recognise the warning signs of sexually harmful behaviour?

One of the hardest things for parents to discover is that their child may have sexually harmed or abused another child. In this situation, denial, shock and anger are normal reactions. If it is not responded to quickly and sensitively, the effect on the whole family can be devastating. For this reason it is vital to contact someone for advice about what to do as soon as you suspect that something is wrong. The positive message is that early help for the child or young person and their family can make a *real* difference. Evidence suggests that the earlier children get help, the more chance there is of preventing them moving on to more serious behaviour. It is important to be alert to the early warning signs that something is going wrong. If you are in this situation, remember that you are not on your own. Many other parents have been through similar experiences and, as a result, the child and family found the help they needed and were able to rebuild their lives. The first step is to decide that it would be helpful to talk it over with someone else.

Warning signs of sexually harmful or abusive behaviour

Do you know a child or adolescent who:

- Seeks out the company of younger children and spends an unusual amount of time in their company?
- Takes younger children to 'secret' places or hideaways or plays 'special' games with them (e.g. doctor and patient, removing clothing etc.) especially games unusual for their age?
- Insists on hugging or kissing a child when the child does not want to?
- Tells you they do not want to be alone with a child or becomes anxious when a particular child or young person is coming to visit?
- Frequently uses aggressive sexual language about adults or children?
- Shows sexual material to younger children?
- Makes sexually abusive telephone calls?
- Shares alcohol or other drugs with younger children or teens?
- Views child pornography on the internet or elsewhere?
- Exposes his or her genitals to younger children?
- Forces sex on another adolescent or child?

If you answered yes any of these questions, you should talk to the child or young person and seek advice. The Stop it Now! helpline is available to talk over your concerns in confidence and advise on where to go for help if this is needed.

Recognising the signs that your child may be the victim of abuse

For many reasons, children find it very difficult to tell anyone that they are being abused, whether by an adult or by another child. Nearly three-quarters of them tell no one before they become adults themselves. These are the most common reasons why children do not tell:

- People who abuse children may offer a combination of gifts or treats and threats about what will happen if the child says 'no' or tells someone. They may make physical threats, but more usually the threat is about what may happen if children tell.
- In order to keep the abuse secret, abusers will often play on children's fear, embarrassment or guilt about what is happening, perhaps convincing them that no one will believe them. Sometimes abusers make children believe that they enjoyed it and wanted it to happen.
- If the abuser is another child or young person, the victim may be confused about his or her feelings and be persuaded that what is happening is OK or that 'everyone is doing it'.
- There are other reasons why children stay silent and do not tell, perhaps they feel they have no one to talk to, or there may be a lack of open communication in the family. Very young or disabled children may not have the words or means of communication to let people know what is going on.

For these reasons, talking with and listening carefully to children is the best prevention. Because they often find it so hard to tell us in words, it is important to be alert to the warning signs that they may be being abused.

"We couldn't understand at first why he hadn't told us. Now we know how confused he was. He felt that it was his fault, even though he hadn't wanted it to happen."

Parents of a teenage boy who was sexually abused by two friends.

Signs that a child or young person may be being abused include:

- Behaving in an inappropriate sexual way with toys or objects
- Nightmares, sleeping problems
- Becoming withdrawn or very clingy
- Becoming unusually secretive
- Sudden unexplained personality changes, mood swings and insecurity
- Regressing to younger behaviours, e.g. bedwetting
- Unexplained fear of particular places or people
- Outburst of anger
- Appetite loss and sudden changes in eating habits
- New, adult words for body parts with no obvious source
- Talk of a new, older friend and unexplained money or gifts
- Self-mutilation (cutting or burning) in adolescents
- Physical signs e.g. unexplained soreness, pain or bruises around genitals or mouth; sexually-transmitted diseases, pregnancy
- Running away
- Not wanting to be alone with a particular child or young person

NB Some of these signs may be caused by other factors and changes in a child's life. If you are worried, talk to someone you trust or ring the Stop it Now! Helpline.

Protecting our children

A positive approach to protecting our children is to establish a good, open relationship with them, through talking about their activities, hopes and worries on an everyday basis. A safe relationship between adults and children is one in which secrets are hard to keep; where a child who is being abused, or a child who is worried about his or her own behaviour, is able to tell someone. The sooner we recognise potentially worrying situations, the better-protected children will be.

Sometimes the child or young person who presents a risk is a close family member or the son or daughter of a friend. When that happens it's especially painful for us, as parents and carers, to face it and it's even harder for children to tell someone.

There are things we can all do to prevent the sexual abuse of children. Sometimes a person outside the child's immediate family has a clearer view of what is going on than those more closely involved.

Here are some things that you can do to help prevent sexually harmful behaviour between children:

1. Be aware of the warning signs that your child, or another child or young person, may be acting in a sexually harmful or abusive way and seek help if you are worried.

Make sure you understand the signs contained in this booklet so that you are aware of what to look out for at an early stage. If you think a child you know has a sexual interest in, or may be abusing a child, seek professional help. Don't keep it a secret.

2. Talk with children, and listen to what they have to say

Adults and adolescents who sexually abuse children usually rely on secrecy. They try to silence children and to build trust with adults, counting on them to be silent if they have doubts. The first step to tackling this secrecy is to develop an open and trusting relationship with your children. This means listening carefully to their fears and concerns and letting them know they should not worry about telling you anything. It is important to talk with them about sex, and to be comfortable using the words they may need.

3. Demonstrate to children that it is all right to say 'no'

Teach children when it is OK to say 'no', for example when they do not want to play, or be tickled, hugged or kissed. Help them to understand what is unacceptable behaviour and that they must always tell us if someone is behaving in a way which worries them, even if they were unable to say no at the time.

4. Set and respect family boundaries

Make sure that all members of the family have rights to privacy in dressing, bathing, sleeping and other personal activities. Even young children should be listened to and their preferences respected.

5. Set clear guidelines and keep a careful eye on children's internet use and the TV programmes and videos they watch

Explain to children the risks associated with using the internet, restrict access to unsuitable sites and ask them to tell you if they receive messages or emails containing sexually explicit material. Check that TV programmes, films and videos are appropriate to their age.

6. Take sensible precautions about whom you choose to take care of your children

Be careful about who children are left with. Find out as much as you can about baby-sitters and don't leave your child with anyone you have doubts about. If your child is unhappy about spending time with a particular person, talk to the child about the reasons for this.

7. Encourage children to respect themselves and others

Many young people fail to understand the importance of respecting themselves and one another. This is particularly evident in the attitude of some young men towards

girls and young women and creates a climate where sexually harmful or abusive behaviour can take place. Encourage children to treat everyone with respect and be prepared to challenge their attitudes to others.

“I can see now that there was a lot of secrecy in our son’s life that we thought was normal, but now we know what he was hiding. If someone had told us that it was OK to talk to our son about these things, or showed us how to do it, maybe this wouldn’t have happened.”

- Mother of a sexually abusing adolescent

What you can do if you suspect that your child is sexually harming another child, or thinking about doing so

It is very disturbing to suspect that your child, or a child you know, may be sexually harming someone. It is so much easier to dismiss such thoughts and put them down to imagination. You may also be worried about the possible consequences of taking action. But help is available and it is better to talk over the situation with someone than to discover later that you were right to be concerned. And remember, you are not alone. Thousands of people every year discover that someone in their family or circle of friends has abused a child.

Children who are abused and their families need help to recover from their experience and the abuser needs help to stop. Sometimes, in the most serious cases and depending upon the age of the child or young person involved, this may include legal action and a court hearing. This is a difficult process for everyone involved, but support is available and it may be in the best way to prevent further harm.

If you are worried that your son or daughter may be sexually harming another child, or if you suspect that your child is being abused, act now! Action can lead to abuse being prevented, and children who are being abused receiving protection and help to recover. It can also lead to the abuser getting effective help or treatment to stop abusing and growing up as a safer member of our community. We need to get support for ourselves too.

“Talking to my son was the best thing I could have done. I set a clear limit, I let him know it was wrong and I told him that I would not help him keep his secrets. I also let him know that I loved him, that he was not alone, and that together we would find him help.”

- The mother of a young man who was sexually abusing

Action you can take:

If on reading this leaflet you have concerns about your child or a child you know, you can:

**Contact the Stop it Now! Helpline
Freephone
0808 1000 900**

If you are unsure or worried about the behaviour of someone you know (whether they are an adult or a child), our experienced advisors will talk over your worries with you and can offer confidential advice on what steps you could take.

OR

**Contact your local
police and social services**

The police and social services have joint working arrangements for responding to suspected child sexual abuse. Someone will talk to you about your concerns and may ask for details so the situation can be investigated further. Police and social services teams are very experienced in this work and will deal sensitively with both the children involved and their families to ensure they get the help they need. We all have a responsibility to take positive action to safeguard our children and speak out in order to protect them.

Our children are our future and all of us have a responsibility to protect them. Take action. If you are worried that uour child, or a child you know, may be sexually someone, you are not alone. Help is available. Call the Stop it Now Helpline to talk confidentially with professionals who have experience of similar situations.