

Childhood Sexual Development & Sexual Behaviour

Birth - 17 years of age

Developmentally Appropriate - Serious/Extreme



Childhood Sexual Development & Sexual Behaviour

Infancy and Early Childhood – Approximately Birth to 3 years

Source: Paton & Bromfield (2024)

Developmentally Appropriate	Developmentally Inappropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning	Serious/Extreme
<p>The type of behaviour is expected for the child's developmental stage.</p> <p>It is seen as socially acceptable and aligned with community expectations. It is typically considered appropriate sexual expression and/or exploration.</p>	<p>Sexual behaviour that is outside what is expected for the child's developmental stage.</p> <p>Sexual Behaviour is developmentally, socially, contextually and/or culturally inappropriate. Considered on the fringe of being developmentally acceptable. May be displayed as a single incident behaviour that is slightly outside the developmental norm or behaviour that may be outside the developmental norm but readily accepted within a social peer group or set context. Inappropriate sexual behaviour can include appropriate sexual behaviour that is displayed in inappropriate contexts, particularly by younger children.</p>	<p>Concerning, Very Concerning and Serious/Extreme Behaviours are all considered Harmful Sexual Behaviours. This is because they can cause harm to either the child or young person displaying the behaviours, or any other child or young person involved.</p> <p>Behaviour that is clearly outside developmental expectations.</p> <p>May also include developmentally inappropriate behaviours displayed as part of a pattern of behaviour. Regardless of context, the behaviour is generally socially unacceptable even within diverse peer or social groups.</p>	<p>This behaviour is clearly outside developmental expectations, is considered socially unacceptable and is often intrusive and harmful to the child or young person displaying the behaviours and/or others.</p> <p>A child's intent or motivator of the behaviour may also differ markedly from the norm in this group. They may disregard the other child's wishes, distress or resistance prioritising their own gratification or needs over others.</p>	<p>An extension of behaviours that are 'Very Concerning', 'Serious/Extreme' behaviours may also include elements of physical violence, sadism, degradation, and be highly intrusive and harmful to others.</p> <p>Particularly in early adolescence and adolescence, these behaviours may evoke sexual arousal linked to violence and use of power and force.</p>

*** Note for professionals: For more comprehensive information please read [Practice Guide: Understanding Harmful Sexual Behaviours: A Layered Continuum](#).

Childhood Sexual Development & Sexual Behaviour

Infancy and Early Childhood – Approximately Birth to 3 years

Source: Paton & Bromfield (2024)

Developmentally Appropriate	Developmentally Inappropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning	Serious/Extreme
<p>From birth, children will explore all their body parts equally, including the genitals; may include touching, holding, poking with fingers, pulling and unconscious masturbation. Play-based behaviour with others can include various games that involve children being naked, playing gender-based roles and make-believe games such as mums and dads, mums and mums, dads and dads; doctors and nurses; families; 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours', and so on. Children may also want to touch and/or look at the genitals of others around them in a natural curiosity as they work out how their bodies are the same and different. This is more common around bath and dressing time; they often enjoy being nude. Language expression and jokes can include conversations about bottoms, breasts, vaginas, penises, and general bodily functions.</p>	<p>Regular masturbation that can be redirected with little emotional impact on or distress for the child. Exposing themselves to others or seeking to look at other children's genitals outside play-based behaviour. Behaviour will usually dissipate with reinforcement of boundaries and redirection. Seeking opportunities to follow adults and other children into private areas such as toilets, bathrooms and bedrooms when changing to see or touch their genitals, bottom, or breasts. Touching the genitals of animals.</p>	<p>Masturbation that occurs often, even after redirection. Play-based themes that are persistently sexual in nature, and/or demonstration through language or play of adult sexual themes. Seeking opportunities to watch others when undressed, in bathrooms or toilets. Invading other children or adults' private space to lift/move their clothing to see and/or touch their private parts or see their genitals, bottom, or breasts.</p>	<p>Masturbation that is compulsive and occurs often. A preference for this activity over others. Masturbation that is rough or self-injurious. Play-based themes that are persistently sexual in nature even after redirection. Themes are simulated or demonstrated through play with other children, for example, simulating sex with or without clothes. Persistent touching of others' genitals and private parts and/or seeking opportunities to do so even after redirection. Use of sexually aggressive and/or explicit language.</p>	<p>Using force to engage other children in sexual activity regardless of the context of play (i.e., normal fantasy play). Use of explicit sexual acts within play on other children, such as oral sex, masturbation, and penetration (penetration may be with finger/objects).</p>

Childhood Sexual Development & Sexual Behaviour

Lower Primary School – 4 to 6 years

Source: Paton & Bromfield (2024)

Developmentally Appropriate	Developmentally Inappropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning	Serious/Extreme
<p>Play-based behaviour with others can include various games that involve children being naked, playing gender-based roles and make-believe games such as mums and dads, mums and mums, dads and dads; doctors and nurses; families; 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours', and so on. Children may also want to touch and/or look at the genitals of others around them in a natural curiosity as they work out how their bodies are the same and different. This is more common around bath and dressing time; they often enjoy being nude. Language expression and jokes can include conversations about bottoms, breasts, vaginas, penises, and general bodily functions. Children become more curious about gender, sexuality, where babies come from and other sexual-based concepts in this stage and ask caregivers a range of questions. Children may begin to explore their own bodies and genitals with more purpose, which may include behaviour more akin to masturbation.</p>	<p>Regular masturbation that can be redirected with little emotional impact/distress for the child. Exposing themselves to other children or seeking to look at other children's genitals outside play-based behaviour. Behaviour will usually dissipate with reinforcement of boundaries and redirection. Seeking opportunities to follow adults and other children into private areas such as toilets, bathrooms and bedrooms when changing to see or touch their genitals, bottom, or breasts. Using language of a sexually explicit nature and/or including sexual themes in play such as open mouth kissing and fondling. This behaviour can be redirected with appropriate prompts and cause little emotional impact or distress for the child. Persistent nudity in contexts where this may be considered inappropriate even after they have been redirected. Touching the genitals of animals.</p>	<p>Regular masturbation that interferes with other activities, occurs within an inappropriate context or location (e.g., a public space), or persists after redirection. Frequently exposing themselves in public or to other children. Invading other children or adults' private space to lift or move their clothing to see and/or touch genitals, bottoms, or breasts. Using language of a sexually explicit nature and/or including sexual themes in play or when interacting with other (such as open mouth kissing and fondling). Persisting to touch the genitals of animals even after redirection. Intentionally accessing pornography and/or playing video games with violent or sexual content.</p>	<p>Compulsive masturbation that interferes with other activities, occurs within an inappropriate context/location (e.g., a public space), is aggressive and/or self-injurious, and persists after redirection. Pursuing other children in an intimidating and/or aggressive manner to touch their private parts or engage them in sexualised behaviour. Using language of a highly sexually explicit nature and/or simulating sexually explicit acts in or out of play, such as oral sex and anal or vaginal penetration. Engaging significantly younger or more vulnerable children in sexualised behaviour. Frequently watching pornography.</p>	<p>Forcing other children to engage in sexual behaviour; may include force and include oral sex and penetration with objects. Persistently using language of a highly sexual and explicit nature. Taking photos of themselves or others' genitals or generally sexual images and/or sharing these types of images with others. Frequently watching and/or showing other children pornography.</p>

Childhood Sexual Development & Sexual Behaviour

Middle Primary School (Pre-Pubescent) – 7 to 9 years

Source: Paton & Bromfield (2024)

Developmentally Appropriate	Developmentally Inappropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning	Serious/Extreme
<p>Masturbation or touching of own genitals in private. Increased sense of privacy and more care with regards to toileting and changing in private.</p> <p>Increased curiosity about other children’s genitals of the same and opposite gender, which may translate into looking and touching of familiar same-age children’s genitals. Language expression and jokes continue to include conversations about bottoms, breasts, vaginas, penises, and general bodily functions. Increased curiosity and questions about gender, sexuality, where babies come from and other sexual-based concepts. Children may also begin to discuss having girlfriends or boyfriends, and behaviour may extend into handholding or kissing another child of a similar age. Exposure to pornography via accidental or ‘curious’ searching (e.g., while searching ‘bottoms’)</p>	<p>Masturbation that occurs within an inappropriate context or location (e.g., a public space) or persists after redirection to a private space. Lack of awareness of the need for privacy and, therefore, frequent nudity around others or in inappropriate contexts. Using language of a sexually explicit nature that persists after redirection. Engaging other children of a similar age in sexual behaviours, including fondling. Displaying sexual themes and actions in play with other children, though the behaviour can be redirected and modified. Intentionally accessing pornography and/or playing video games with sexual content.</p>	<p>Regular masturbation that interferes with other activities or that occurs with other children. Frequently exposing themselves in public or to other children. Engaging significantly younger or more vulnerable children in sexualised behaviour. Invading other children or adults’ private space to lift or move their clothing to see and/or touch their genitals, bottoms, or breasts. Using language of a sexually explicit nature and/or including sexual themes in play or when interacting with others (such as open mouth kissing and fondling). Frequently watching pornography.</p>	<p>Compulsive masturbation that interferes with other activities, and/or is aggressive and/or self-injurious. Pursuing other children in an intimidating and/or aggressive manner to touch their genitals, bottoms or breasts or engage them in sexualised behaviour. Using language of a highly sexually explicit nature and/or simulating sexually explicit acts in or out of play such as oral sex and anal or vaginal penetration. Frequently watching pornography to the exclusion of other activities.</p>	<p>Forcing other children to engage in sexual behaviour; may include force and include oral sex and penetration with objects. Persistently using language of a highly sexual and explicit nature. Taking photos of their or others’ genitals (or generally sexual images) and sharing these with others. Frequently watching and showing other children pornography. Watching pornographic material that is violent, degrading, or deviant.</p>

Childhood Sexual Development & Sexual Behaviour

Upper Primary School (Pubescent) – 10 to 11 years

Source: Paton & Bromfield (2024)

Developmentally Appropriate	Developmentally Inappropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning	Serious/Extreme
<p>Masturbation or touching of own genitals in private. Masturbation can become more targeted toward sexual gratification. Increased sense of privacy; more care with regards to toileting and changing in private. Engaging in relationships with same- aged peers of the same and different gender and engaging with them in sexual affection such as hugging and kissing. Using sexually explicit language and displaying exhibitionism with peers, particularly in change rooms and bathrooms. Increased curiosity and discussion with peers about sex, sexuality, gender, pregnancy, puberty, and so on. Exposure to pornography via curious searching (e.g., while searching puberty, breasts, penis etc). Taking and sharing photos of themselves in various poses (clothed).</p>	<p>More frequent masturbation that interferes with other activities or occurs in inappropriate contexts or locations (e.g., a public space) or that includes other same-aged peers of the same or opposite sex in parallel or reciprocal masturbation. Disregard for privacy and regular exposure of themselves in public spaces even after redirection. Engaging in relationships and sexual behaviour with older individuals or behaviour that includes fondling of genitals. Using sexually explicit language that displays knowledge above their developmental age. Frequent displays of exhibitionism with peers, particularly in change rooms and bathrooms, even after redirection. Displaying voyeuristic behaviours with peers. Accessing pornography or sharing it with same age peers. Sexually explicit communication with peers such as sexting and sharing photos of themselves in sexually suggestive poses.</p>	<p>Compulsive masturbation that interferes with other activities, and/or is aggressive, and/or self- injurious. Persistently displaying voyeuristic behaviours with peers that are persistent and/or include attempts to touch others' genitals. Engaging in relationships and sexual behaviour that includes mutual masturbation or oral sex (same-aged peers). Engaging significantly younger or more vulnerable children in sexualised behaviour Frequently watching pornography to the exclusion of other activities and/or using pornography to masturbate. Taking and sharing photos of themselves in various poses unclothed and/or exposing genitals.</p>	<p>Forcing other children to watch them masturbate. Pursuing other children in an intimidating and/or aggressive manner to touch their genitals, bottoms or breasts or engage them in sexualised behaviour. Using language and/or behaviour of a sexual nature that seeks to degrade, humiliate, or threaten others. Engaging in sexual relationships with older individuals that include oral sex. Increased interest in pornographic materials that are violent, degrading, or deviant. Showing pornography to younger or more vulnerable children. Taking and sharing photos of themselves in sexually explicit poses unclothed and/or exposing genitals.</p>	<p>Forcing other children to engage in sexual behaviour; may include force and include oral sex and penetration with objects. Having vaginal or anal sex. Engaging in sexual behaviour with peers that includes group sex or having multiple sexual partners over time. Frequently watching pornographic material that is violent, degrading, or deviant (including viewing of material that depicts children or includes children – i.e., child abuse material.) Taking and sharing sexually explicit photos of others without permission and/or using coercion to gain such photos from others.</p>

Childhood Sexual Development & Sexual Behaviour

Lower Secondary School (Early Adolescence) – 12 to 14 years

Source: Paton & Bromfield (2024)

Developmentally Appropriate	Developmentally Inappropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning	Serious/Extreme
<p>Marked by increased sexual curiosity to explore their own and others sexual motivations, sexual and gender identity, orientation, and behaviour. Young people are experimenting with others and themselves. Age of consent, and potential criminal consequences of their actions becomes a complicating factor at this age for some children and young people. As in other elements of their life, they seek physical privacy and may begin to masturbate for purposeful sexual pleasure. They often continue to engage in the online world and may seek to explore sexual interest via accessing a variety of pornographic content. Some may also use this content during masturbation for sexual arousal. They will begin to explore intimate relationships with same-age peers of either sex and may have brief or ongoing sexual relationships that routinely include hugging, kissing, and fondling. Using sexually explicit language and exhibitionism with peers. Taking and sharing photos of themselves in various poses (clothed). This may extend to communications of a sexual nature (e.g., sexting). They may begin to push the boundaries with peers and the content shared.</p>	<p>Although precarious depending on the actual age of both young people involved, sexual relationships may progress to include mutual masturbation and oral sex. Engaging in intimate relationships with peers of up to a two-year age gap as their social networks expand. Masturbation that is more frequent or occurs in inappropriate contexts or not in private. Disregard for the privacy of self and others. Regular exploration of pornographic material or exploration of material that is explicit. Preoccupation with sexually explicit language or use of sexual language in inappropriate contexts. Sexting that is prolific or non-reciprocal with peers. Taking and sharing photos of themselves in sexually explicit poses, unclothed and/or exposing genitals. Persuading peers to engage in sexting, share photos of themselves in various poses (clothed, but which may be considered sexually suggestive).</p>	<p>Sexual behaviours with others that includes vaginal or anal sex (with protection). Intimate relationships with individuals more than a two-year age gap. Compulsive masturbation that interferes with other activities, and/or is aggressive, and/or self-injurious, or where the young person feels compelled to do this in public. Use of sexually explicit language to intimidate others regardless of the type of communication. Invading others' privacy as a form of voyeurism. Preoccupation with accessing pornography to the exclusion of other activities (with or without masturbation). Taking and sharing photos of themselves in sexually suggestive poses, unclothed or exposing genitals, which persists after provision of information that this is not appropriate and may be deemed a criminal offence. Coercing or bribing peers to engage in sexting or sharing photos of themselves in various poses (clothed, but which may be considered sexually suggestive).</p>	<p>Engaging in sexual behaviour with others that includes group sex or having multiple sexual partners. Using coercion or bribery to engage others in sexual behaviours of any level. Intimate relationships with individuals who are significantly different in age, and/or where there is a significant power or developmental difference. Regularly masturbating to sexually explicit and deviant pornographic material (e.g., containing animals, violence, degrading behaviours or depicting/showing children). Taking and/or sharing sexually explicit photos of others without their consent. Coercing or bribing peers to engage in sexting or sharing unclothed photos of themselves in various poses.</p>	<p>Frequently lying about their age for the purpose of engaging significantly older individuals in sexual activity. Forcing other children to engage in sexual behaviour; may include force and include oral sex and penetration with objects. Having unprotected vaginal or anal sex or engaging in sexual behaviour while intoxicated. Preoccupation with masturbating to sexually explicit and deviant pornographic material, particularly where this materials portrays or includes younger children (e.g., child abuse material). Taking and sharing sexually explicit photos of others without permission. Exchanging sexual behaviour/acts for tangible or non-tangible things (e.g., drugs, food, alcohol, money, social inclusion, and so on).</p>

Childhood Sexual Development & Sexual Behaviour

Upper Secondary School (Adolescence) – 15 - 17 years

Source: Paton & Bromfield (2024)

Developmentally Appropriate	Developmentally Inappropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning	Serious/Extreme
<p>In this stage, young people's sexual curiosity continues to increase as they begin to experiment even more with themselves and others. As they become more confident in their sexuality and interests, they may begin to explore more diverse sexual experiences and erotic material and behaviour. Engaging in sexual activity with both male and female partners. Privacy continues to be important, and they will continue to masturbate in private for sexual gratification. They continue to engage in the online world and may seek to explore sexual interest via accessing a variety of pornographic content; some may also use this content during masturbation for sexual arousal. They will continue to explore intimate relationships with peers of either sex and may have brief or ongoing sexual encounters that include oral, anal, and vaginal sex. Relationships will generally be with peers, consensual and reciprocal in nature. Sexual experiences which are reciprocal in nature, such as mutual masturbation and oral sexual gratification of their partners becomes important. Sending and receiving sexually explicit texts and sexually suggestive photos (clothed) is relatively typical</p>	<p>Preoccupation with sexual behaviour and seeking intimate partners. Multiple sexual partners, frequently changing sexual partners, or engaging sexual partners that are substantially different in age. Engaging in sexual behaviour with others that includes more than one other person at a time (e.g., group sex). Communication with peers that is explicit, unwanted, or harassing, regardless of communication type used (e.g., using photos, text, or verbal communication). Lack of understanding of privacy and frequent exposure of self in public places (e.g., flashing genitals). Seeking out pornographic material that is explicit and includes themes of power imbalance and group sex. Taking and sharing photos of themselves in various poses unclothed and/or exposing genitals. Persuading peers to engage in sexting, share photos of themselves in various poses (unclothed or which may be considered sexually suggestive).</p>	<p>Compulsive masturbation that interferes with daily activities, is self-injurious, or occurs in public. Repeated exposure of genitals, bottoms, and breasts in a public place with peers (e.g., flashing). Accessing pornographic material that is explicit, sexually aggressive and/or illegal, such as showing violence or animals. Taking and sharing photos of themselves in various poses (which may be considered sexually suggestive), unclothed, exposing genitals. Coercing or bribing peers to engage in sexting or sharing photos of themselves in various sexual poses.</p>	<p>Lying about their age for the purpose of engaging significantly older individuals in sexual activity. Engaging children or others who are developmental younger or vulnerable in sexual activity. Having unprotected vaginal or anal sex or engaging in sexual behaviour while intoxicated. Regularly masturbating to sexually explicit and deviant pornographic material (e.g., containing animals, violence, degrading behaviours). Taking and/or sharing sexually explicit photos of others without their consent.</p>	<p>Compulsive masturbation that interferes with daily activities, cannot be contained to private places, and causes physical and emotional harm. This may include self-injurious behaviours and the compulsion to masturbate in public. Forcing or coercing others into sexual activity regardless of their age or developmental vulnerabilities. This may include the use of bribery, manipulation, blackmail, and so on. Preoccupation with masturbating to sexually explicit and deviant pornographic material, particularly where this materials portrays or includes younger children (e.g., child abuse material). Taking and sharing sexually explicit photos of others without permission and/or using coercion to gain such photos from others. Exchanging in sexual behaviour or acts for tangible or non-tangible things (e.g., drugs, food, alcohol, money, social inclusion, and so on).</p>



eSafeKids recommends watching the *What Happens When? Child and Adolescent Sexual Development* video. You'll find this and other videos in the [eSafeKids Members' Community](#).

Childhood Sexual Development & Sexual Behaviour

Additional Resources

For more detailed information eSafeKids recommends the following sources:

Professionals

[Practice Guide: Understanding Harmful Sexual Behaviours: A Layered Continuum](#)

[Traffic Lights Booklet](#)

[Hackett Continuum: Understanding Sexualised Behaviour in Children](#)

Parents/Caregivers

[Raising Children Network: Childhood Sexual Development and Sexual Behaviour](#)

[Talk Soon. Talk Often](#)

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