

MIDDLESEX CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER

SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Sexual development is part of human development. It includes physical changes in a child's body, as well as sexual knowledge and behavior. A child's sexual knowledge and behavior are influenced by their age, what they observe, and what they are taught. Sexual exploration and play are a natural part of child development. In general, sexual behavior in young children falls into two groups:

AGE-APPROPRIATE BEHAVIORS (under age 7):

- Occurs between children who know each other well / play together regularly.
- Occurs between children of the same age and physical size.
- Is spontaneous and unplanned.
- Is voluntary (all involved agree and none are uncomfortable or upset).
- Is transient and often only requires adult guidance and redirection.

Examples of typical behavior: asking questions about bodies; showing interest in other people's bodies, such as peeking or wanting to touch; "playing doctor" or "you show me yours" with a friend of similar age; wanting to be naked; giggling at "potty words."

PROBLEMATIC SEXUAL BEHAVIORS (PSB):

- Involve acts beyond a child's developmental stage / simulate adult sexual acts.
- Involve threats, force, or coercion.
- Involve children of widely different ages or differing physical size or abilities.
- Persist or return despite redirection (are intrusive and disruptive).
- Cause harm or potential harm to a child (physical or emotional).

Examples of PSB: imitating adult sexual acts, such as intercourse; inserting objects into their own or another child's body; coercing another child into sexual activity or insisting on secrecy; continuing after repeated redirection or becoming distressed when stopped.

No single factor causes PSB in children. Some have been sexually abused; others have not. They may have been physically abused, witnessed or experienced other traumatic events, or observed specific sexual acts (in person or online/TV). A child with PSB is a child first. These behaviors are treatable, and most children do well with support.

A single behavior doesn't tell the whole story. Look at the pattern, the children involved, and how the child responds to redirection. If you are unsure about a specific behavior or want a referral for PSB treatment, call the Middlesex Children's Advocacy Center at 781-897-8400.

