

Towards A Better Understanding Of Children's Sexual Behavior

by Fred Kaeser, Ed.D.,
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Introduction

Whether you're a parent or a teacher, you have probably noticed that children today seem to be expressing more complex and challenging sexual behaviors than children have in the past. With increasing regularity, child professionals are accumulating evidence that suggests that children (pre-pubertal) are not only displaying more sexual behavior, but are doing so at younger and younger ages. Some of these behaviors are precocious in nature; sexual behaviors that are typically associated only with adolescence. Others either occur with an unusually high frequency or are unnecessarily intrusive to others.

This increase in the sexual behavior of children should come as no surprise. We are after all, raising a generation of "super-sexualized" young people. Children around the country are being exposed to an onslaught of sexual messages that come at them with the speed of lightening, from all directions, and on an on-going and daily basis. These sexual messages are frequently very explicit, far too violent, awash in male dominant-female submissive images, heterosexist, and sensational. They can come from the print media, television and cable, movies and videos, music, the Internet, the child's neighborhood and home life, and even the White House (a la our past president).

Therefore it is not unreasonable to suggest that before a child reaches puberty, she or he has likely been exposed to thousands if not tens of thousands of sexual messages, many of which are incomprehensible and frightfully confusing. Unfortunately, substantial empirical evidence demonstrates that a majority of parents in the United States still do not communicate regularly or with enough effectiveness the sexual matters that pertain to their children. Likewise, schools in the U.S. have a general reluctance to tackle education pertaining to sex, with many sex education programs starting too late and lacking in sufficient detail.

The effects of increasing sexualization on children

We know that exposure to sexualized messages, particularly those that are incomprehensible, can have several effects on children.

- 1 They can raise many questions and cause considerable confusion. Parents today are in the unenviable position of having to deal with certain sexual issues at earlier ages with their children than parents just ten years ago. For example, a parent came to me two years ago and said that her seven year old daughter asked her, "Did the President really have that lady kiss his private parts?"
- 2 Excessive exposure to sexual messages can cause some children's typical curiosity about sex to become increasingly distorted, particularly when parents and adults fail to adequately intervene. All children are curious about things that are sexual. With continual exposure however, we know that there are some children who run the risk of becoming too preoccupied with sexual matters.

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- 3 Some children will act out the sexual messages they are exposed to. We have known for some time that children who have been sexually abused have a greater tendency to display sexualized behavior. We now believe the same can happen when children have been exposed or confronted with adult-like sexual behavior.
- 4 Some children will utilize their sexualized behavior to hurt other children. Of the different effects that exposure to incomprehensible sexual messages can have on children, this one is the most troubling. If children are becoming increasingly sexualized, so are the bullies of the world. The sexualized bully easily learns to use his sexual behavior to intimidate others. He, and sometimes she, quickly comes to realize that the sexual transgression of another is both powerful and rewarding. This explains the apparent increase in coercive or hurtful sexual behavior between children.

Normative vs. problematic sexual behavior of children

Adults need to know when a child's sexual expression is normative and developmentally appropriate, and when it has crossed this boundary into the realm of problematic behavior. The ability to support the healthy sexual growth and development of children is an important task for parents, teachers, and other professionals who work with them.

Some of the normative sexual behaviors that pre-pubescent children will typically display are:

- 1 Masturbation and interest in own genitals
- 2 Occasional interest in the private body parts of others ("show me yours & I'll show you mine"); an occasional peek at others' private parts; playing doctor
- 3 An occasional "flashing" of one's own genitals
- 4 Imitating parental roles (acting like a daddy/mommy)
- 5 Genital/reproductive discussions with same age peers & with parents; wanting to know what sex is
- 6 Kissing, flirting, innocent seduction behavior
- 7 Some use of "dirty" words and jokes

Evaluating the appropriateness of children's sexual behaviors often requires an assessment of the context in which the behaviors occur. While there are sexual behaviors that in and of themselves are problematic (e.g. simulating or attempting intercourse), we frequently need to evaluate them in context. Contextual factors that may need consideration are:

- 1 Frequency and repetitiveness of the behavior
- 2 Use of force, aggression, or coercion
- 3 Age discrepancies in children involved in a behavior
- 4 Equality or mutuality among children involved
- 5 Expressed intent

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There are some sexual behaviors that may be problematic or at least require some adult intervention and monitoring. Some of these are:

- 1 A preoccupation with sexual matters or themes
- 2 Occasional attempts to expose others' genitals
- 3 Repeated attempts to view others' private parts
- 4 Repeated sexually explicit discussions with peers
- 5 Single occurrence of touching genitals of same age peers
- 6 Sexual graffiti
- 7 Repeated exposure of one's own genitals

There are also those sexual behaviors that are clearly problematic. Some of these are:

- 1 Repeated genital touching of others
- 2 Forced exposure or touching of others' genitals
- 3 Sexually explicit threats or inducing fear or threats of force
- 4 Masturbation at the expense of other daily activities or anal/vaginal insertion while masturbating
- 5 Simulating oral, anal, vaginal intercourse
- 6 Attempting oral, anal, vaginal intercourse
- 7 Compulsive interest in sexual matters

Parental intervention in their child's sexuality

Although many of us have never had any formal sexuality education while growing up, or had any preparation for teaching our children about sex, we should be the single most important source of sexual information for our children. If we don't make every attempt to be the primary sex educator of our children, rest assured that our children's friends or the television will be.

Some of the important tips to remember when addressing your child's sexuality are:

- 1 Become an "askable" parent. Make sure you communicate to your children that they are free to ask you any question they may have about sex. If they ask, be prepared to answer. Don't evade a question or dismiss it. If you don't answer it, someone else may. It is okay to say you're not sure but you will find the answer and have it for him/her tomorrow.
- 2 Become familiar with the developmental tasks and needs of children that pertain to their sexuality. Also, educate yourself about sex and sexuality and practice talking about it so you become more comfortable.

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- 3 Don't wait for your child to ask you questions about sex before bringing up the topic. If they don't ask, it doesn't mean they don't need to know.
- 4 If you think you speak often enough about sexual matters with your child, think again. Even when parents think they do, research tells us their children don't.
- 5 Accept the fact that your child is a sexual human being and will be for life.
- 6 Expect your child to be exposed to sexual matters. Don't assume that because you don't "show it or say it" at home your child won't know something about it.
- 7 Be prepared to offer your child factual information about sexuality along with your values and beliefs about responsibility (e.g. "Masturbation cannot hurt you; I don't mind that you do it, but it is a private behavior and should only be done in private.")
- 8 Be prepared to deal with sexual issues/questions that may come sooner than they should. As with the example given earlier about the seven year-old asking about the President and oral sex one could say, "Yes, I have heard that. As weird as it sounds, some adults who love each other will do that. We don't talk about this publicly, but I am glad you came to mommy to ask about it."
- 9 Above all, remain calm.

About the Author

Fred Kaeser, Ed.D is the Director of Health Services for Community School District Two, New York, NY. Dr. Kaeser earned his doctoral degree in Human Sexuality Studies at New York University. His research interests pertain to children's sexuality and the sexuality of persons with developmental disabilities. Dr. Kaeser also teaches human sexuality at NYU and C.W. Post College.

References and Related Books

[Juvenile Sexual Offending](#)

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