

## Sexual Behaviors of Young Children That Occur in Schools

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Although very little research exists on children's sexual behaviors, it has been suggested that young children today are expressing more sexual behavior and interest in sexual matters than they have in the past. Consequently, it is likely that they will express some of this behavior publicly within a school setting. When these behaviors occur at school, it is incumbent upon educators to be able to accurately determine whether their students' sexual behaviors are normative or problematic, along with how they should be addressed. This study describes the observations and reactions of 29 kindergarten, 1st-, and 2nd-grade teachers towards the sexual behaviors of their students over a 6-month period. Of the 378 sexual behaviors that were observed, 162 were determined to be within the normative range of children's sexual behavior. A total of 184 behaviors were identified as problematic or potentially problematic, requiring varying levels of adult intervention, including therapeutic follow-up. Sexual behaviors of a communicative nature were the most frequently observed behaviors, followed by students touching other students' genitals, buttocks, or breasts. There were 14 behaviors where students either forced other students to expose or touch their private parts, or used sexually explicit threats towards them. The teachers discussed only 26 of the sexual behaviors with a colleague, and only 9 of the incidents were reported to the school principal; none was reported to the state's child protective hotline.

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A certain degree of sexual curiosity and behavior among young children should be expected and viewed as developmentally normative (Friedrich, Fisher, Broughton, Houston & Shafran, 1998; Frayser, 1994). However, it has been suggested that more children today are expressing a greater interest in things that are sexual, and as such are also engaging in more sexual behaviors (Cavanaugh-Johnson, 1991). If true, it is unlikely that children have suddenly become more innately interested in sexuality. Rather, it is probably more a matter of having been exposed to sexuality through the vast array of sources of sexual messages and information that exist in today's technological society. Television (both broadcast and cable), movies, adult videos, print media, telephone sex numbers, and the Internet all present a considerable challenge to parents

who want to be able to monitor how much sexual information their children are exposed to. Whether it's the 6 o'clock news sharing what our president has or hasn't done sexually, public buses that display ads depicting scantily clad, prepubescent-looking boys and girls, or the sexy lingerie magazines that seem to come through the mail daily, the opportunity for young children to be inadvertently exposed to incomprehensible sexual stimuli is very real.

Unfortunately there exists virtually no empirical research detailing the actual sexual behaviors of young children. Why this is so is not exactly clear, although we would surmise that it is due to the US culture's reluctance to perceive young children as sexual beings, the political incorrectness and potential legal labeling of the research process as being of a pedophilic nature, and the difficulty involved in securing a research population. The research on children's sexual behaviors that does exist has been confined primarily to parental reports (or what parents remember seeing their children do sexually) and retrospective studies of what adults remember doing sexually when they were children.

Finkelhor (1983) surveyed 796 college students and found that 63% of the males and 59% of the females reported having engaged in some sexual behavior prior to age 12. In a similar study, Haugaard and Tilly (1988) questioned 1,784 college students and found that 42% had experienced a sexual encounter before age 13. In a study of 1,114 parents of children ages 2 to

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12 years, parents reported self-stimulation or masturbation, exhibitionism, and behaviors that pertain to personal space and boundaries as the most frequently observed sexual behaviors among their children (Friedrich et al., 1998). Additionally, parents of children with a history of sexual abuse claim that their children engage in more frequent and intrusive sexual behaviors when compared to children without such a history (Friedrich et al., 1992). Sexually abused children have an increased likelihood of acting out sexually with others by using force, coercion, or threats (Consentino, Meyer-Bahlburg, Alpert, Weinberg & Gaines, 1995; Cavanaugh-Johnson, 1989; Ryan, 1997).

With the abundance of different sources of sexual information available to young children, one should expect to see an overall increase in their sexual interests and behaviors. Any repeated exposure to incomprehensible sexual stimuli can place children at risk for acting out what they have observed (Gil & Cavanaugh-Johnson, 1993; Ryan & Blum, 1994). When children are presented with these confusing sexual messages, the potential for them to behave in a sexually explicit manner increases. Children will also be more likely to engage in problematic sexual behaviors when risk factors such as a lack of empathetic parenting and inconsistent care, physical or sexual abuse, adult sexualized models of compensation, and divorce exist (Ryan, 1997). Not surprisingly, many young children today are exposed to adult levels of sexual stimuli—causing confusion at least, and possible pathology at worst.

Our own experience working in a large urban school district with approximately 19,000 elementary school children supports this. We have received more reports from principals and faculty concerning the sexual behaviors of their young students during the past 6 or 7 years than at any time in the past. It seems that children today are not only more likely to express themselves sexually, but are doing so at younger ages. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that school personnel will encounter sexual behaviors in the young students with whom they work.

School administrators and teachers are sometimes faced with the difficult responsibility of having to negotiate very challenging sexual behaviors presented by their students. Those schools that have prepared their faculty well will be able to provide students with the necessary support and/or intervention they need in such matters. Those that have not will probably fail to address their students' sexual behaviors in an adequate manner, thereby opening the doors for negative criticism from parents and possible litigation (i.e., claims of sexual harassment or sexual misconduct).

Unfortunately, most administrators and teachers are untrained in children's sexual development and have little if any expertise in dealing with their sexual behavior. Our experience indicates that teachers will either react negatively to their students' sexual behavior or avoid involvement by denying it exists or by minimizing its seriousness. We frequently encounter school staff who simply cannot reconcile the reality that many young children will behave in a sexual manner.

Having an understanding of the range of children's sexual behavior is very important. It allows teachers and others to understand whether a student's behavior is normative or problematic, thus enhancing their ability to determine how they should respond when their students behave sexually (Wardle, 1995). Additionally, as mandated reporters, teachers are expected to report suspected cases of child sexual abuse when reasonable cause exists. When children engage in adult-like sexual behavior or participate in repetitive sexual behavior, they should be followed carefully to determine the need to report to the state's child protective hotline. A review of the categorization of children's sexual behavior that has been suggested by Ryan et al. (1988) should prove useful to teachers when evaluating their student's sexual behaviors (see Table 1).

As a result of the recent US Supreme Court decision *Davis v. Monroe County* (1999), school districts are liable if they allow a hostile learning environment to occur by not providing students with reasonable protection from sexual harassment by other students. According to Wendel (1997), schools are literally scrambling for answers to the disturbing increase in student-to-student sexual abuse. As such, school administrators have a vested interest in preventing any student-to-student sexual behaviors that occur in schools. The early identification of children's problematic sexual behaviors could lead to earlier intervention and effectively limit the possibility that sexual harassment might occur.

This study attempts to describe the observations made by elementary school teachers of their students' sexual behaviors that occurred in school during a 6-month period. The students' sexual behaviors were subsequently assessed as normative or problematic and the various teacher responses to these behaviors are reported.

### Method

A total of 29 elementary school teachers from 10 public schools in a large urban school district participated in the study. There were 11 kindergarten teachers, 11 first-grade teachers, and 7 second-grade teachers. Collectively their classes totaled 703 students on

Table 1

*Ryan's Range of Sexual Behaviors of Children*

## Normal (behaviors often seen in young children)

- Genital or reproduction conversations with peers similar age siblings
- Show me yours/I'll show you mine with peers
- Playing doctor
- Occasional masturbation without penetration
- Imitating seduction (e.g., kissing, flirting)
- Dirty words or jokes within cultural or peer group norms

## Yellow flags (these behaviors should put caregivers on alert; requires an adult response; have potential to become problematic)

- Preoccupation with sexual themes
- Sexually explicit conversation with peers
- Preoccupation with masturbation
- Mutual masturbation or group masturbation
- Simulating foreplay with dolls or peers with clothing on
- Single occurrences of peeping, exposing, obscenities, pornographic interests, frottage
- Attempting to expose others' genitals
- Sexual graffiti
- Precocious sexual knowledge

## Red flags (problematic; definitely requires an adult response; probable therapeutic follow-up)

- Sexually explicit conversations with significant age difference
- Touching genitals of others
- Degradation or humiliation of self/others genitals
- Forced exposure of other's genitals
- Inducing fear or threats of force
- Sexually explicit proposals or threats, including written notes
- Repeated or chronic peeping, exposing, obscenities, Pornographic interests, frottage
- Compulsive masturbation, task interruption to masturbate
- Masturbation, including vaginal or anal penetration
- Simulating intercourse with dolls, peers, animals

## No questions (these behaviors require therapeutic follow-up; possible report to child protective service)

- Oral, vaginal, anal penetration of dolls, children, animals
- Forced touching of genitals
- Simulating intercourse with peers with clothing off
- Any genital injury or bleeding not explained by accidental cause

register. Twenty-six of the teachers were female and three were male. There were 360 male students and 343 female; 44% were designated as Asian/Pacific Islander, 22% as Hispanic, 12% as African American, and 21% as Caucasian. Approximately 73% of these students were eligible for free lunch, and seven of the 10 schools were eligible for Title I funding. [Au. note: Title I is federal funding for public school districts based on the number of low-income families in that district.]

None of the schools or teachers could be randomly recruited for this study. Under the requirements set forth by the study's funding source, the selection of schools had to include as many Title I schools as possible. Of the district's 10 elementary schools that were eligible for Title I funding, teachers from seven schools

agreed to participate in the study. Three additional schools were selected based upon their previous experience with students' problematic sexual behaviors.

Given the various responsibilities the teachers had as participants in the study, the recruitment process was subject to contractual and collective bargaining constraints. Accordingly, participation was voluntary and the teachers from each school were selected by seniority. There was an effort to secure three teachers per school, with one teacher representing each of the three grade levels. Unfortunately this was not possible, and fewer second-grade teachers participated in the study. A total of 30 teachers was selected; however, one withdrew just prior to the start of the study and was not replaced.

Teachers were asked to maintain a journal of their observations of each of their students' sexual behaviors that occurred in school during a 6-month period. Teachers used their own judgment in determining whether a behavior was sexual in nature. Students were assigned coded numbers so that when they were referenced in a teacher's journal, only their corresponding numbers were used. As such, anonymity was preserved and only the teachers knew which students were involved in the sexual behaviors. However, the codes were designed in such a way to inform the researchers of the gender of each student.

Journals included questions that teachers were asked to respond to for each student's behavior they interpreted as being sexual. From December through May, teachers recorded their observations of any sexual behavior their students engaged in. Teachers were requested not to wait any longer than 24 hours after a behavior occurred so as to reasonably ensure accuracy in retelling what they observed. Teachers entered the date, time, and location for each sexual incident, along with the code numbers assigned to each student. The questions that teachers responded to for each journal entry that are germane to this article are as follows.

1. Detail and describe the behavior that you observed (include the behaviors of all the children involved).
2. Do you believe that this behavior is problematic? Please explain.
3. According to your observations of the child involved in this sexual behavior, what are your thoughts about why it occurred?
4. Describe and detail each action taken by you and the school.
5. Is there anything else you would like to add to this journal entry about this sexual behavior?

At the end of each month, teachers would mail copies of their journal entries to the researchers. At the conclusion of the study, teachers' journal entries were reviewed and interpreted by the researchers. Each entry was categorized demographically, by the type of sexual incident that occurred, and by the actions the teachers took in response to each incident. Further, the students' sexual behaviors were identified and grouped according to the categories of sexual behaviors developed by Ryan et al. (1988).

### Results

Our findings are presented in the following order: demographics pertaining to the students involved in each sexual incident, the types of sexual behaviors

engaged in by the students, classification of the students' sexual behaviors according to Ryan et al. (1988), and the actions taken by the teachers in response to each sexual incident.

#### *Demographics*

A total of 378 sexual behaviors were reported by the 29 teachers during the 6-month period of journal-keeping. Kindergarten teachers reported a total of 155 incidents, first-grade teachers reported a total of 165 incidents, and second-grade teachers reported 58. A majority of the incidents (43%) involved two children. The number of incidents reported by each school ranged from a high of 78 to a low of zero (mean = 37.8; two teachers from the same school did not report any sexual behaviors for the entire 6 months). There were 155 different students who initiated the 378 sexual incidents. Seventy-seven students initiated one incident each, and 78 initiated multiple incidents. Forty-nine students initiated two incidents each, 10 students initiated three each, 7 students initiated four each, 6 students initiated five each, 4 students initiated six each, 1 student initiated eight, and another student initiated 13 incidents.

The number of students involved in each sexual behavior incident ranged from one to five, with more male students ( $n = 468$ ) involved than female students ( $n = 327$ ) (see Table 2). Of the 378 incidents, 222 (58.7%) involved at least one female student, as compared with 298 incidents (78.8%) which included at least one male. There were no males involved in 80 of the incidents as compared to 156 incidents that had no female involvement. Of those incidents that included a female student, there were 145 that involved only one female, 57 that involved two, 14 that had three, 8 that had four, and 2 that involved five females. Of those incidents that included a male student, 168 involved only one male, 98 involved two males, 24 had three males involved, and 8 incidents involved four males.

#### *Types of Sexual Behaviors That Students Engaged In*

Many of the behaviors the teachers noted in their journals involved either individual expressions of sexuality or sexual behaviors that were engaged in with other students. Accordingly, we grouped the behaviors into five distinct categories accompanied by the behaviors' frequency and percentage of occurrence (see Tables 3 and 4). Category 1 ( $n = 113$ , 30%) includes sexual behaviors of a communicative nature. Category 2 ( $n = 56$ , 14.8%) behaviors are modeled after adult sexual behavior, identified as being either sexually explicit (e.g., open mouth or make-out kiss, pretend intercourse) or non-sexually explicit (e.g., pretending to be mom/dad or having own baby, casual kiss). Category 3 ( $n = 45$ , 11.9%) behaviors involve self-touching

Table 2  
Male and Female Students Involved in a Sexual Incident

Number of male students involved per incident	frequency	percent
0	80	21.2
1	168	44.4
2	98	25.9
3	24	6.4
4	8	2.1
5	0	0.0

  

Number of female students involved per incident	frequency	percent
0	156	41.3
1	145	38.4
2	57	15.1
3	14	3.7
4	4	1.0
5	2	0.5

of erotic body parts (e.g., genitals, buttocks, breasts), non-erotic parts (e.g., massage own stomach), and masturbation (stimulation of genitals for purpose of arousal). Category 4 ( $n = 94$ , 24.9%) includes students who touched other students' erotic (e.g., genitals, buttocks, breasts) and non-erotic body parts (e.g., behavior perceived by teacher to be of sexual nature such as stroking of arm, neck, back). Category 5 ( $n = 70$ , 18.5%) includes those sexual behaviors that did not meet the criteria for categories 1 through 4 and could not be grouped so as to establish a new category.

Student-to-student communication on a sexual topic occurred more than any other behavior ( $n = 3$ , 21.9%). This included students making sexual comments verbally or in writing to each other, exposing other students' private body parts, and voyeuristic behavior (e.g., peeking under the bathroom stall at other students). This was followed by student-to-student touching of other students' genitals, buttocks, or breasts ( $n = 77$ , 20.4%).

Students displayed 56 instances of modeling adult sexual or gender-related behaviors, and 12 (3.2%) of these were classified as sexually explicit. Seven students were observed masturbating (1.9%), and there were 36 incidents (9.5%) when students were observed touching their own genitals, buttocks, or breasts.

The 70 journal entries the researchers grouped into category 5 represent a variety of sexual behaviors. Some of these behaviors include a student cleaning the crotch of his pants while other children giggled; a student whose pants slipped down in class and said, "Oops I'm naked"; a boy and girl being in the bathroom together at the same time; two students examining an X-rated magazine they found in the schoolyard; and a student looking at pictures of pregnant women

with great interest. Some of the incidents in category 5 were considered by the researchers to have little if anything to do with behavior of a sexual nature (e.g., one student bumping into another student's rear end during class line-up; two students laying next to each other and holding hands during a reading activity; a student licking his lips in a certain manner; a student talking with other students about urination). Nevertheless, the researchers allowed these behaviors and others like them to remain classified as incidents because the teachers viewed them as sexual.

#### Classification of Sexual Behaviors

We attempted to group the students' sexual behaviors according to the schema developed by Ryan et al. (1988). The classification of children's sexual behaviors established by Ryan et al. is based in part on years of experience working with young children who perpetrate sexual offenses against other children. Sexual behaviors that are considered normal are behaviors that are frequently observed in children. Behaviors designated as *yellow flag* should put teachers on alert; they represent a heightened sense of sexuality on the child's part, and are usually perceived as intrusive or upsetting to others. These sexual behaviors require some adult intervention and should be monitored as they have the potential to become problematic. The *red flag* behaviors are definitely problematic and require an adult's intervention and probable therapeutic follow-up. The *no questions* behaviors are so far removed from children's typical sexual behavior that they need to be addressed therapeutically, and may well indicate the child is being abused.

In classifying the students' sexual behaviors, we not only looked at the categories of sexual behaviors identified by Ryan et al., but we also attempted to determine the context in which each behavior occurred. While certain sexual behaviors are clearly problematic among young people (i.e., oral sex, simulating intercourse), Ryan et al. suggest that it is often necessary to examine the contextual features when determining whether a sexual behavior is normative or problematic. Factors to consider include whether the behavior has repeated itself and how often, whether there is equality in the students' relationship, and if mutual consent was established. If acts of aggression, force, or coercion are involved, one's concern for the students' behavior should be put on high alert.

For example, if a student attempts to expose another student's genitals, and the student has no prior history of the behavior and did not repeat the behavior during the course of the study, the behavior was classified as a yellow flag. However, if the student was known to have a history of the behavior or engaged in the behavior again at some other time during the

Table 3  
*Categories of Sexual Behaviors*

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Category 1 Communicative behaviors (verbal or written communication of a sexual nature, including body exposure and voyeuristic behavior)	
Behavior 1.	singular child communication on sexual topic
Behavior 2.	student-to-student communication on sexual topic
Behavior 3.	student-to-teacher communication on sexual topic (i.e. student asking sexual question)
Category 2 Modeling behaviors (modeling adult behavior that is either sexually explicit or not sexually explicit)	
Behavior 1.	singular child modeling adult behavior, not sexually explicit (e.g. gender roles, pretend to have baby, pretend being mom/dad)
Behavior 2.	student-to-student modeling adult behavior, not sexually explicit (e.g. gender roles, kissing, holding, pretend to have baby, pretend being mom/dad)
Behavior 3.	singular child modeling adult behavior, sexually explicit behaviors or movements (e.g. humping the floor or objects, provocative/gyrating hips)
Behavior 4.	student-to-student modeling adult behavior, sexually explicit behaviors or movements (e.g. open-mouth or make-out kiss, simulate intercourse)
Category 3 Self-touching behaviors (touching one's own body parts)	
Behavior 1.	child touching own non-erotic body parts (e.g. massage own stomach)
Behavior 2.	child touching own erotic body parts (e.g. genitals, buttocks, breasts)
Behavior 3.	masturbation
Category 4 Touching others behavior (touching behaviors with others, either erotic or non-erotic body parts)	
Behavior 1.	student-to-student touching of non-erotic body part perceived by teacher to be of a sexual nature (e.g., stroking or massaging stomach, neck, back)
Behavior 2.	student-to-student touching of erotic body part (e.g. genitals, buttocks, breasts)
Behavior 3.	student-to-student masturbation
Behavior 4.	student-to-teacher touching of non-erotic body part
Behavior 5.	student-to-teacher touching of erotic body parts (e.g. genitals, buttocks, breasts)
Category 5 Other Behavior (behaviors that could not be grouped in other categories)	
Behavior 1.	All behaviors in this category

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study, the behavior was classified as a red flag. If a student forced another student to expose his or her genitals, even if this happened only one time, the behavior was classified as a red flag.

We were unable to determine the appropriate classification for 32 (8.5%) sexual behaviors; there was insufficient information in those journal entries to make a classification. We did categorize 162 incidents (42.9%) to be within the normative range of what we would expect to see among children of this age group. There were 155 incidents (41%) that we classified as yellow flags, 24 (6.3%) identified as red flags, and 5 (1.3%) classified as no-questions behaviors.

#### *Action Taken in Response to Each Incident*

We were not able to determine the exact actions taken by the teachers in response to 35 of the incidents (9.3%). In 60 incidents (15.9%) the teachers took no action, in 248 (65.6%) the teachers handled the behavior alone, and in 35 cases (9.3%) the teachers brought it to the attention of another school professional. Teachers responded in several ways when they handled the behaviors alone. These included nonverbal responses to

the students on 18 occasions (i.e., using gestures or some behavior to intervene), providing a class lesson or creating rules in an attempt to alter the behavior on 120 occasions, and responding verbally to the students on 110 occasions. Of those teachers who responded verbally to an incident, a verbal reprimand of the children's behavior was used to handle 75 incidents (19.8%). In 35 incidents (9.2%), teachers labeled the type of behavior they witnessed the children engage in and then reacted empathetically (e.g., "I saw you touch John's penis. When you do that it makes me feel uncomfortable and John as well").

When teachers brought an incident to the attention of another professional, the matter was discussed with a fellow teacher on 13 occasions, a guidance counselor or school social worker on 12 occasions, the principal on 9 occasions, and with an outside professional on one occasion. None of the incidents was reported to the state's child protective hotline.

#### **Discussion**

It is impossible to know just how accurate the teachers' journal entries of their students' sexual behavior

Table 4  
Frequency and Percentage of Sexual Behaviors

Category	Frequency	Percent
Category 1: Communicative Behaviors		
Beh. 1: singular child	6	1.6
Beh. 2: student-to-student	83	21.9
Beh. 3: student-to-teacher	24	7.1
Category 2: Modeling Behaviors		
Beh. 1: singular child (not sexually explicit)	3	0.8
Beh. 2: student-to-student (not sexually explicit)	41	10.9
Beh. 3: singular child (sexually explicit)	3	0.8
Beh. 4: student-to-student (sexually explicit)	9	2.4
Category 3: Self-Touching Behaviors		
Beh. 1: touching own body (non-erotic)	2	0.2
Beh. 2: touching own body (erotic)	36	9.5
Beh. 3: masturbation	7	1.9
Category 4: Touching Others Behaviors		
Beh. 1: student-to-student (non-erotic)	11	2.9
Beh. 2: student-to-student (erotic)	77	20.4
Beh. 3: student-to-student masturbation	1	0.3
Beh. 4: student-to-student (non-erotic)	5	1.3
Beh. 5: student-to-student (erotic)	0	0.0
Category 5: Other Behaviors		
Beh. 1: all other behaviors	70	18.5

are when compared to what actually took place. It may be that certain factors can influence the degree to which one sees or observes the sexual behavior of others. It has been suggested by Rutter (1971) that educated mothers who believe that sexual feelings or behaviors among their children are normal tend to report more sexual behavior among their own children than do mothers who have less education and do not believe their children would display sexual behavior. Friedrich et al. (1998) alluded to the possibility that when parents are more open and honest about their own sexuality, they are more likely to disclose information about their own children's sexual behavior. Perhaps similar factors could explain why two teachers observed no sexual behaviors among their students for the entire 6-month period. However, the influences at play while the 29 teachers were making their observations are beyond the scope of this study.

The three researchers discussed each incident sufficiently until there was unanimous agreement of the classification and categorization of the students' behaviors. There was no inter-rater check for reliability, and thus the authors make no attempt to suggest how valid or reliable these data are. However, we are secure in our belief that the teachers' journal entries are real and represent what the teachers believe they observed.

There was no attempt to generalize to the greater population of children, and so we do not suggest that the children represented in this study display more or less sexual behavior than do other children of similar

ages. There is also no way to infer whether different teachers would have made the same observations or had the same perceptions of the students' behaviors as the teachers in this study. Nevertheless, if one presumes that the data presented here are for the most part accurate, they do provide professionals who work with young children additional insight into children's sexuality and related behaviors.

This may be the only study of its kind that discusses children's sexual behaviors that were observed as they actually occurred. It is the only study that identifies the sexual behaviors of young children that occur in public elementary schools. This study does not rely on the potentially biased viewpoints of children's parents or on the accounts of remembered events that took place in the past. These accounts of children's sexual behaviors were recorded by observant teachers within 24 hours after the behaviors occurred. Consequently, the pitfalls that could accompany a study involving long-term memory or parental bias are for the most part absent in this report.

It was not surprising to find that students' sexual behaviors of a communicative nature occurred more often than any other category of behavior. Professionals have known for many years that young children communicate in a variety of ways about sexuality. Children are frequently curious and will ask questions about private body parts and aspects of the reproductive process. They also talk about things of a sexual nature with their peers and with adults.

The addition of behaviors pertaining to the exposure of private body parts and voyeuristic behaviors dramatically increased the number of behaviors in this category that were considered yellow or red flag. Clearly, a majority of the yellow flag behaviors involved exposing other students' private body parts without force or trying to peek at other students while in the bathroom. An additional six red flag incidents involved students forcing other students to expose their genitals, buttocks, or breasts. The remaining four red flag incidents involved students making sexually explicit threats to other students.

While many of the sexual behaviors that were modeled after adult behavior were within the normal range of childhood behavior, there were 14 incidents that were not. Twelve were classified as yellow flag and were concerned primarily with make-out or open-mouth kissing, or bodily movements of a highly suggestive nature (e.g., gyrating or thrusting the hips towards other students). There was one no-questions incident in which two students were found simulating sexual intercourse.

Although we know that some young children touch other children's private body parts, we were neverthe-

less surprised at the number of incidents involving students' touching other students' genitals, buttocks, and breasts. Of the 77 sexual behaviors in this category, 25 were considered normative expressions of childhood behavior (e.g., playful poke in the buttocks, playful touch of the groin while pushing during a class lineup). However, we determined that 54.5% ( $n = 42$ ) were either problematic or potentially problematic. There were 28 yellow flag incidents in which students deliberately touched the buttocks or breasts of other students, and 14 red flag incidents when students were observed touching the genitals of other students. There were four no-questions incidents in which students forcibly touched the genitals of other students.

Students who touch the genitals, buttocks, or breasts of other students, or who force others to expose these body parts, are engaging in particularly problematic behaviors. They represent potential cases of sexual harassment and make schools vulnerable to parents' anger, particularly if the school's administration is perceived as having minimized the behavior or not taken it seriously enough. Not surprisingly, parents find it quite disconcerting if their child's private parts are touched by another child while at school. Considerable pressure can be placed on a school's administration by parents when a sexual incident between young students has occurred. Additionally, the media frequently find student sexual misconduct an attractive news story to pursue. A few years ago, several incidents of 'forced' kissing between first graders—which resulted in suspensions—made headlines around the country.

Of major concern in this study are the 29 incidents that were classified as either red flag or no questions (7.6% of all the behaviors). Students who were the victims in these incidents reported to their teachers that they experienced fear, and they frequently expressed concern that it could happen to them again. Admittedly the thought that 5-, 6-, and 7-year-old children would express hurtful sexual behavior towards other children is difficult to fathom. It is, however, a reality that needs to be addressed with a sense of urgency. And as hard as it may be to believe, there are children who will molest other children.

Consequently, we believe that all of the red flag behaviors should have been referred to a therapeutic provider for follow-up, and perhaps to the state's child protective hotline. It was definitely incumbent upon the teachers involved in the five no-questions behaviors to report these incidents to the hotline as an indication of possible abuse or neglect. Unfortunately, only one of these cases was referred for consultation and no reports were made to the state's child protective hotline.

The failure of the teachers to report or refer all but one of these red flag or no-questions incidents is particularly troubling for several reasons. As mandated reporters, teachers must report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect to the state's child protective hotline. By not reporting to the hotline, the teachers placed themselves in a potentially libelous situation. Also, a child who forcibly touches the genitals of another child or who simulates sexual intercourse is so atypical that anyone with reasonable knowledge of children's sexuality should have made a call to the state's hotline.

We now know that a majority of adult sexual offenders manifest their perpetrator tendencies during childhood (Gil & Cavanaugh-Johnson, 1993; Ryan, 1997). The ability to identify developing patterns of abusive behavior in young children can lead to earlier intervention, thereby reducing the chances that offender behavior will occur later in life. By not making a referral to an appropriate therapeutic provider represents a missed opportunity to help these young children.

Most teachers in this study either chose to take no action concerning their students' sexual behaviors or decided to handle their students' sexual behaviors on their own (total of 81.5%). Although 184 incidents were determined to be problematic or potentially problematic, only 26 cases were discussed with another professional and just 9 were reported to the principal. Given the Supreme Court decision on school sexual harassment (*Davis v. Monroe County*, 1999), these actions place the school in a tenuous situation at best. Perhaps the greatest weakness within a school system that has to deal with events of sexual harassment is when teachers address these problems in an isolated fashion. Cases of sexual harassment need to be reported properly, and a complete and thorough investigation must be conducted as needed. Failure to do so leaves the school vulnerable and sets the stage for potential legal involvement.

### Conclusion

If the data presented here are representative of what is occurring in other elementary schools, one can presume that a considerable amount of sexual behavior between students occurs in the youngest school grades each year. Much of this sexual behavior may well be problematic or potentially problematic, requiring some form of adult intervention or response. A proportion of these behaviors could be indicative of children who are being abused or neglected in the home. The behaviors could be signs of developing or future abusive sexual behavior, or may be examples of actual student-to-student sexual harassment.



It appears likely that school personnel who work with young children will encounter their sexual behavior. Therefore, it is essential that these personnel have a basic understanding of children's sexual development and the manner in which they express their sexuality. Educators must appreciate the fact that children are sexual long before they reach puberty, and that the seeds of adolescent sexual behavior are likely planted in early childhood. Consequently, they need to become more familiar with and understanding of what constitutes the normative and problematic sexual behavior of children, how to appropriately react and respond to these behaviors, and to identify when it is necessary to refer a student's sexual behavior to a higher expertise.

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