

Factsheet 1: Identifying problematic and harmful sexual behaviour

Sexual behaviour is generally a normal, healthy part of development in children and young people.¹ It includes any behaviour, discussions or interests related to relationships, sexuality and sex.²

We can think about sexual behaviour as being made up of behaviours that range from *normal, healthy and age-appropriate* to *problematic and harmful*.³

'*Problematic and harmful sexual behaviours*' refers to all sexual behaviours that are concerning in children and young people. These behaviours can be directed to oneself and/or others.⁴ They can also include online behaviours, such as those involving the internet, texting or social media.⁵

Problematic sexual behaviour	Harmful sexual behaviour
<p>Problematic sexual behaviour is sexual behaviour that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is not considered typical or developmentally appropriate for the age of the child or young person, and • can also include developmentally appropriate behaviours that are shown in a situation that is not appropriate.⁶ 	<p>Harmful sexual behaviour is sexual behaviour that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is not appropriate for a child's stage of development, • may result in harm to the child or young person themselves or to others, or • may involve coercion, force, or a misuse of power towards another individual (e.g., child, young person, adult).

How can I tell if a sexual behaviour is normal?

Whether a sexual behaviour is considered 'normal' versus 'problematic or harmful' will depend on what is appropriate or normal for the child's or young person's stage of development (e.g., emotional, intellectual) and age.⁷ Other factors also need to be considered, such as the cultural context and if a child or young person has a developmental or intellectual disability.⁸ Generally speaking, normal sexual behaviour is behaviour that:⁹

- is appropriate or normal for their stage of development and age
- does not interfere with their relationships
- does not interfere with their development (e.g., physical, social, emotional)
- is voluntary, mutual and those involved have consented
- is not harmful to others
- is accompanied by positive feelings, emotions or moods, such as laughter or curiosity
- is ceased upon redirection.

Some possible examples of normal, problematic, and harmful sexual behaviours can be found in the following table. **This is not a full list.** You can find detailed information and guidance in the resources in the box:

'Where can I find out more about whether a sexual behaviour is normal?'

Normal	Problematic	Harmful
Toddlers (1-3 years)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rub or touch their genitals • Show someone else their genitals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still touching their genitals even if someone tries to get them to do something else • Inviting a child to engage in sexual activity or touching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being left out of typical childhood activities due to persistent rubbing or touching of their genitals • Masturbation that causes injury to their genitals
Pre-schoolers (3-5 years)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touch their genitals or masturbate • Kiss other children and hold their hands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent rubbing or touching of their genitals in public despite others trying to distract them or get them to move on to something else • Persistent coarse sexual language despite being told not to use such language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated rubbing or touching of other's genitals • Talking persistently about sexual activities and sex
School age (5-8 years)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touch their genitals or masturbate • Be more private about their body and bodies generally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tricking or forcing children into playing games of a sexual nature • Persistent flashing of their bottoms or genitals to children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online pornography use on a daily basis or more often • Preference for masturbation instead of doing other enjoyable things
Pre-teens (9-12 years)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masturbate in private • Kissing and flirting with peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being preoccupied with masturbation • A single event of interest in pornography 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic (ongoing) interest in pornography • Touching other's genitals without their permission
Teenagers (13-18 years)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masturbate in private • Consenting sexual intercourse with a partner of a similar age and developmental ability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent rubbing or touching of their genitals in public • Accessing content that is sexually explicit (e.g., websites, R18+ movies) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sending sexual images to others that are unwanted • Online pornography use several times per day

Table adapted from NSW Government (unpublished) and Raising Children Network (2021a)

Following are detailed resources that can assist you in **identifying problematic or harmful sexual behaviour**. If you are unsure if a behaviour is age-appropriate, consult with your line manager or supervisor.

Where can I find out more about if a sexual behaviour is normal?

Raising Children Network: Offers resources on normal sexual behaviour, as well as problematic and harmful sexual behaviour. Resources are categorised by age of the child or young person.

Practice Guide: Responding to young people living in out of home care who engage in harmful sexual behaviour (pp. 13-14). This guide from the Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care and the Australian Childhood Foundation contains graphics that help distinguish types of sexual behaviour. It includes examples of sexual behaviour across the spectrum for children and young people aged 10-17 years.

A Common Approach to Identification and Support (CAIS) for NSW: provides examples of developmentally typical, problematic and harmful sexual behaviours by age group.

1 Raising Children Network (2020)

2 True Relationships and Reproductive Health (True) (2015)

3 Hackett (2010); Mitchell, Tucci, Fernandes and Howell (2020); NSW Government (unpublished)

4 NSW Government (unpublished)

5 Belton and Hollis (2017); Hackett (2019)

6 Hackett (2014); Hackett, Branigan, & Holmes (2019); NSW Government (unpublished)

7 NSW Government (unpublished); Hackett (2019)

8 NSW Government (unpublished); True (2015)

9 Government of South Australia, Department for Child Protection (2020); Life Without Barriers (2022); Mitchell, et al (2020)