

Sexual behaviour in children and young people – information for parents and carers

Find out what sexual behaviour is developmentally appropriate for your child, and the types of behaviour where your child's school, preschool or childcare may need to respond.

Children and young people's sexual behaviour

Children and young people are sexual beings from birth. They may show different sexual behaviour at different ages and stages of their development.

Developmentally appropriate sexual behaviour

Most children and young people show developmentally appropriate sexual behaviour.

This behaviour is:

- typical for their age and stage
- between children or young people equal in age, size and developmental ability
- light-hearted, curious, mutual and spontaneous
- a natural part of child development
- about curiosity and understanding their own and other people's bodies and relationships
- balanced with other interests.

The developmental abilities of children and young people with disability and additional needs might be different from other children and young people the same age.

Concerning sexual behaviour

Some children and young people show concerning sexual behaviour.

This behaviour might:

- not be typical for their age and stage
- be between children who are not equal in age, size or power
- happen often or be intense
- make adults worry about the health, development or safety of the child or young person, or others
- be unusual for the child or young person.

Harmful sexual behaviour

A very small number of children and young people show harmful sexual behaviour.

This behaviour might:

- not be appropriate for the child's age and stage
- be between children where there is a big difference in age, developmental ability or power
- be secretive or involve bribery or trickery
- be forced on others, excessive, degrading or aggressive.

Children's safety and wellbeing in school, preschool and childcare

Educators and care workers keep children safe and support their healthy sexual, social and emotional development by:

- making sure learning and play spaces are safe
- helping children to develop skills for getting along with others
- involving parents, carers and other professionals – including police and child protection when it's necessary
- following the right legal procedures
- supporting children and young people through difficult times – considering what is best for everyone, not just a single child.

When sexual behaviour happens in schools, preschools or childcare

All sexual behaviour needs a response

Children and young people need to learn that some behaviour is not okay at school, preschool or childcare.

For example, it's common for 4-year-olds to touch their genitals in public while they're still learning about privacy, but this behaviour is not okay at preschool. It's also common for teens to passionately kiss when they're in a relationship, but this behaviour is not for school.

Educators and care workers should not make children and young people feel bad for behaviour that is typical for their age and stage. They should respond by reminding children and young people about privacy and the setting's behaviour expectations. A teacher might say, 'kissing is something that people do in a private place and school is a public place'.

Sometimes developmentally appropriate sexual behaviour happens at the wrong time and in the wrong place. Reminders about the behaviour expectations help most children and young people learn what is okay and not okay.

Your child's school, preschool or childcare will talk to you if they are worried about your child's sexual behaviour.

Concerning or harmful sexual behaviour needs a different response

This type of sexual behaviour might be against the law or be sexual abuse. Schools or other settings might be worried about keeping everyone safe.

Educators and care workers need to make sure that children and young people understand behaviour expectations and develop the right skills for respectful relationships.

Behaviour support plan

If your child has shown concerning or harmful sexual behaviour, the school, preschool or childcare might suggest a behaviour support plan. The plan helps to make sure:

- everyone is safe
- your child is supported to have their needs met.

Support and safety plan

If your child has been affected by the concerning or harmful sexual behaviour of another child or young person, the school, preschool or childcare might suggest a support and safety plan. The plan helps to make sure the right supports are in place for your child to be and feel safe.

Child protection and police

Sometimes specialist services are told about children's sexual behaviour so they can offer help.

Reporting to the Child Abuse Report Line

By law, schools, preschools and childcare settings have to report to the Child Abuse Report Line (CARL) when they:

- suspect sexual abuse – even when it's by another child or young person
- believe a child or young person is at risk of harm.

The Department for Child Protection might contact you about concerns or involve another service that can help.

Reporting to police

Schools report the following to police:

- all alleged or suspected rape, regardless of the age of the child or young person who has allegedly raped another child or young person
- all other alleged or suspected sexual offences where the child or young person alleged to have committed the offence is 10 years of age or older.

When parents and carers are told about sexual behaviour

If your child was directly involved in, or saw concerning or harmful sexual behaviour, you will be told as soon as possible by the school, preschool or care setting.

You may not be told straight away if specialist services believe it may interfere with the child protection or police response. Sometimes you could find out from a social worker or the police about sexual behaviour that happened at school, preschool or childcare. You might feel angry or upset about this, but please understand that staff were following instructions from the Department for Child Protection, police or both.

If your child was not directly involved in or did not see concerning or harmful sexual behaviour, you will usually not be told about it.

Sometimes, there are good reasons for all parents, or groups of parents, to be told. This will usually be by letter, and you'd be invited to contact a staff member if you have concerns for your child.

Privacy and confidentiality

You have the right to know what the school, preschool or care setting is doing to support your child and keep them safe. You do not have the right to any information about other children and young people.

Suspension and exclusion

Sometimes schools might suspend or exclude a child or young person – this is not a punishment. It gives the school time to put plans in place to keep everyone safe.

When police are investigating a potential criminal offence, sometimes a school cannot suspend or exclude the young person who has allegedly committed the offence. This is because they have the right to know why they are being suspended or excluded and respond, which would interfere with the police investigation.

If you're worried for your child's safety, talk to the school about your concerns.

Sexual behaviour that happens outside of school, preschool or childcare

Education and care services need to respond to sexual behaviour that happens outside of school, preschool or childcare when there's a link between the sexual behaviour and the education or care setting. For example, an alleged sexual assault at a party at the weekend and both students attend the same school.

Helping your child

If your child has shown concerning or harmful sexual behaviour, it might be upsetting to hear about what your child has done. You might feel angry, or you might not believe it. You might be worried about where they learned the behaviour.

If your child has been upset or hurt by another child's concerning or harmful sexual behaviour, you might feel angry and be concerned for their safety.

These situations can be very difficult for all children and families involved.

The best way to help your child is to stay calm, and talk with staff at the school, preschool or care setting. Think about what services and supports could be helpful and be willing to work with others to make plans for everyone to be safe.

Engagement and Wellbeing

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