

Expected? Concerning?

The subject of childhood sexual development and concerning sexual behaviours in children under 12 years is an understudied population and most sex and sexuality education is based on a white, Eurocentric standard. Sexual development doesn't start at puberty. It starts in utero. Early sexual development in children manifests as curiosity about one's own body, exploring its functions, traits, and attributes. It also involves a lot of feelings related to these discoveries. Children need and have the right to receive explicit responses related to issues concerning their sexual development and to receive age-appropriate information, skills, and attitudes to foster healthy development (Cacciatore et al., 2020). Based on our review of the science and our experience working with families who have come to us with a concerning sexual behaviour question, here are some ideas that can help you understand if a child's sexual behaviour is expected or concerning:

Use these experiences as "teachable moments", keep talking to your child about body rules, private part rules, safety, boundaries

EXPECTED BEHAVIOURS ARE...

Children are similar in age, size, developmental level & know one another

Exploratory & curious (feelings are light-hearted, no one is distressed, ashamed or afraid)

Unplanned, spontaneous, irregular, and not done in secret (so it is discovered easily and stops)

Behaviours do not model "adult-like" sex behaviour

Both are agreeing (no violence, force, tricks, or coercion)

Discovery results in embarrassment but no deep feelings of shame, anger, worry, or fear

POSSIBLY CONCERNING BEHAVIOURS ARE...

Children are widely different ages, sizes, abilities, developmental level and/or are new to each other

Involves inappropriate or harmful use of sexual body parts

Behaviour is not easily redirected and/or keeps happening despite saying stop and/or interferes with childhood interests or activities

Behaviours clearly beyond developmental stage (mirror adult-like sex behaviour)

Involves one child threatening, forcing, tricking, or using aggression with another child

Associated with strong emotional reactions like anger, worry, shame

Connect with a helper, make a referral, keep talking to your child