

Harmful sexual behaviours in children & young people

A fact sheet for parents and carers

What is normal sexual behaviour in children and young people?

Most sexual behaviours in children and young people are part of normal development. This includes behaviours that involve another child.

They are usually not openly sexual and are more exploratory and playful. Examples include:

- “I’ll show you mine and you show me yours” conversations with peers
- Self-touching, including exploratory masturbation with hand
- Kissing/holding hands with peers.

If you observe sexual behaviours in your child, consider whether they are appropriate for their age and stage. If they are, provide a calm, corrective response indicating the appropriate time or place for the behaviour.

When is sexual behaviour in children and young people harmful?

Sexual behaviours in children and young people are problematic if it::

- targets a more vulnerable child
- uses bribery, aggression or coercion
- is compulsive, excessive and degrading
- is resistant to normal parental correction and appropriate boundary setting
- involves behaviour that is distressing in nature.

What do I do if my child is displaying these behaviours?

A disclosure of harmful sexual behaviour, particularly toward a sibling or friend, can be devastating for a family. You may feel disbelief, confusion, shock, grief, shame, despair, self-doubt and self-blame.

If your child is displaying harmful sexual behaviours it’s important to seek the advice of a professional. Sexual assault services offer specialist support and counselling to a child/ young person and parent/s. They can help you understand what may be behind the inappropriate or harmful sexual behaviours.

Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) Services

HSB services are for children and young people who have engaged in harmful sexual behaviour.

They provide responsive, developmentally appropriate treatment programs to address the harmful sexual behaviour and the underlying harm they have experienced. They will work with the child and their families and carers to stop the behaviours, and reestablish age and stage appropriate behaviours.

Contact your local sexual assault service for further information: sasvic.org.au/our-members