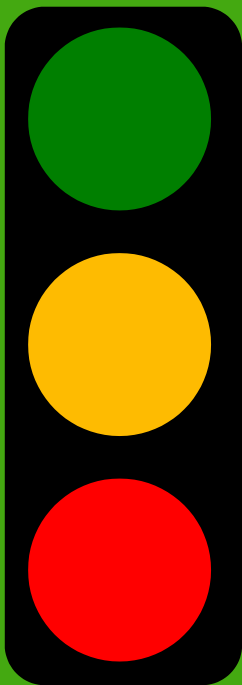


Child Development - Ages & Stages

Age Appropriate Sexual Play and Behaviour in Children aged 0-12yrs

Sexual play and behaviour is part of *normal* development and must be understood in a *contextual* manner

The following is a summary of sexual development in children. It is not an exhaustive list and *should not be used as a diagnostic tool for sexual abuse.*



Green light behaviours are *expected or normal* throughout children's development, shown over three age ranges. The characteristics of such activities are...
spontaneity, curiosity, mutuality, being easily distractible, constituting play amongst equals

Orange light behaviours include play and behaviours that are a *little outside the normal* in either the activities or their *persistence*

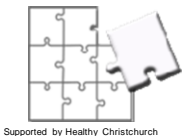
Red light behaviour and play is *concerning* because of the activities and the manner in which they occur. Such behaviours may be characterised by the presence of...
Coercion, secrecy, threats, force, dominance, aggression, compulsivity, a significant age difference between the children*
**Please note, however, that an age difference is not required for abuse to occur.*

Anyone attempting to establish what normal sexual development is must consider the social, cultural, and familial context of the times. Children's sexual development is influenced by many factors at each of these levels.

At the individual level: children move through a series of stages in terms of their physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. The stage they have reached strongly dictates their sexual play and behaviour. Both chronological and developmental ages and stages often need to be taken into account, particularly for children with intellectual difficulties.

At the family level: children are influenced by family stress and/or violence as well as familial beliefs and practices concerning such topics as bodies, nudity, and sexuality as a topic which may or may not be discussed.

At a societal/cultural level: there are influences of the media, religious beliefs, cultural/ethnic differences, individual morality, socio-economically determined values, etc.



Ages & Stages - Green Light Behaviour

Appropriate Behaviour which does not require any intervention

Behaviour in this category is characterised by: *spontaneity, curiosity, light-hearted and easily distracted experimentation and equality of age, size and status* of the children involved. It is worth noting that it is normal for children to touch their own genitals and for boys to have erections across all three of these age periods discussed here.

0-4 years

Children of this age usually have less peer contact than at older ages, therefore many of their behaviours are influenced by the family. Developmentally this is a time of self-exploration, self-stimulation and disinhibition.

- Young children are naturally very sensual and love exploring different touches and feelings such as thumb sucking, body stroking and holding of genitals.
- Wanting to touch other children's genitals, i.e., exploration.
- Asking about or wanting to touch familiar adult's breasts or penises (when in the bath for example), i.e., curiosity.
- Young children playing games such as doctor/nurse, and "show me yours and I'll show you mine".
- Liking being nude.
- Interests in their own bodily functions and body parts, e.g., bottoms, pooh, wee.

5-8 years

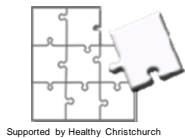
This is a period where children's peer contact significantly increases. Experimental interactions may occur with peers resulting in novel behaviours that do not necessarily reflect family influences. Children of this age are becoming more inhibited and may seem embarrassed when 'caught' by parents.

- Children masturbating and/or using self-soothing touching.
- Increased curiosity in adult sexuality, e.g. questioning about babies, gender differences
- Increased curiosity in other children's genitals, e.g., playing mutual sexual games to see or touch their genitals.
- Telling "dirty" stories, e.g., use of words like pooh, period, vagina, penis, etc.
- Suddenly becoming guarded or more private about their own bodies, e.g., pulling towel up in bath, beginning to lock bathroom door.

9-12 years

This is a period of significant change in sexuality. There is increased peer contact and increased experimentation so that a range of behaviours result. Children's inhibition may either increase or decrease and this must be considered when interpreting behaviours.

- Children using sexual language.
- Having girlfriends and boyfriends.
- Kissing and petting.
- Exhibitionism, e.g., "brown-eyes" or flashing, amongst same age children.
- Children becoming protective/conscious of their bodies and requiring increased privacy, e.g., in the bathroom.



Ages & Stages - Orange Light Behaviour

Behaviour which signals the need to take notice and, if behaviours persist, seek advice

Persistence of these behaviours usually indicates that the child is seeking out sexualised experiences rather than indulging in exploration in the course of normal play. *It is important to consider the frequency and duration of these behaviours. One-off behaviours are of less concern.*

0-4 years

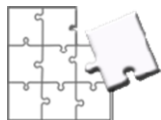
- Children demonstrating pre-occupation with adult sexual type behaviour.
- Pulling other children's pants down or lifting up girls' skirts *against their will*, i.e., coercive forms of behaviour.
- Explicit sexual conversation using sophisticated or adult language.
- Pre-occupation with touching each other's genitals often in preference to other child focused activities.
- Chronic peeping behaviour, i.e., children who are pre-occupied with spying on others, particularly adults, when they are changing or showering.
- Following other children into toilets to look at them or touch them.

5-8 years

- Children demonstrating overt interest in questioning about sexuality that does not dissipate.
- Writing sexually threatening notes to children.
- Engaging in mutual masturbation.
- Using adult language to discuss sex, e.g., "Do you think I look sexy?" or "Look at my dolls – they're screwing".

9-12 years

- Children persistently expressing fears of pregnancy and/or STDs.
- Behaviour which is uncharacteristic, e.g., suddenly wanting to dress in a provocative manner or mix with new or older friends.
- Bullying persistently involving sexual aggression, e.g., grabbing penises.
- Pseudo-maturity: inappropriate knowledge of sexuality or discussions of sexuality in an adult manner.



Ages & Stages - Red Light Behaviour

Behaviour that signals advice should be sought from a health professional

In general red light behaviours are such because of the context they're seen in and the behaviours may actually be the same as those listed under orange light.

When children indulge in sexual play behaviour which is *excessive, secretive, compulsive and carried out in a coercive or threatening manner* adults should be concerned. Children who are subjected to coercion by an older child need to be protected from this behaviour.

**0-4
years**

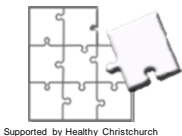
- Children simulating explicit foreplay or sexual behaviour in doll play and/or with other children.
- Persistently masturbating, i.e., active rubbing of genitals.
- Persistently touching the genitals of other children.
- Sexual behaviour between young children involving penetration with objects, or oral sex.
- A child forcing other children to engage in sexual play.

**5-8
years**

- Children persistently engaging in masturbation, particularly in front of others.
- Engaging significantly younger children in sexual activity.
- Sneaking into rooms where there are younger children or children sleeping in order to touch or engage them in sexual play.
- Children simulating sexual acts which are inappropriately sophisticated for their age, e.g., oral sex.
- Sex is a persistent theme in talk, play, art, etc.

**9-12
years**

- Children persistently engaging in masturbation, particularly in front of others.
- Engaging in sexual activity such as oral sex or intercourse.
- Coercing other children of similar or younger age.
- Presence of sexually transmitted diseases.



Child Development - Ages & Stages

Information on Responding to Different Levels of Sexualised Behaviours

Why Responding is Important

- It is the response of others (especially adults) to the behaviour that gives it meaning to the child
- All incidents of sexually harmful behaviour in school merit a response – they are all teachable moments
- They are all opportunities to teach children about boundaries and acceptable behaviour

Why Adults Don't Respond

- We don't like to think of children as having sexual behaviours
- It brings up feelings of discomfort in us that we may want to avoid
- Brings up strong negative reactions of shock and disgust
- Fear! – child may be a pedophile or a sex offender
- May depend on what language we have to describe children's sexual behaviour
- As a result adults may UNDER or OVER-REACT

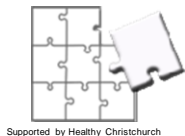
Responding to Sexualised Behaviour in a School Setting

- Respond as you would to other abusive / harmful behaviour
- Sexually harmful behaviour in children and young people is to do with being abusive, not with sexual deviance
- Therefore children must be held accountable for ALL ways in which they are abusive: abuse of self, others and property

Effective School Response

Three Goals (Gail Ryan, 1998)

1. **Encourage communication:** adults provide a model for the child by talking clearly and calmly about their sexual behaviour
2. **Develop Empathy:** adults explain to the child the impact of the behaviour on others
3. **Promote Accountability:** adults help the child to understand the behaviour so that they can control it



Child Development - Ages & Stages

Information on Responding to Different Levels of Sexualised Behaviours

Overview of Levels of Response

There are three levels of response. Each level of response is determined by severity and each level builds on the one before

Name and Respond (level 1 - Green)



Monitor



Confront and Consequence (level 2 - Orange)



Monitor



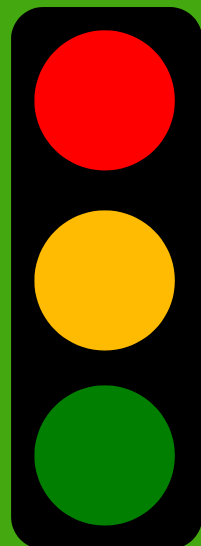
Report and Refer for Assistance (level 3 - Red)

**Level
1**

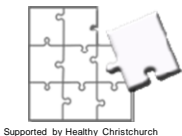
**Level
2**

**Level
3**

Think of Traffic Lights



- **Level 3 – Red Light Behaviour:**
Report & Refer – Monitor
- **Level 2 – Orange Light Behaviour:**
Confront & Consequence – Monitor
- **Level 1 – Green Light Behaviour:**
Name & Respond - Monitor



Child Development - Ages & Stages

Information on Responding to Different Levels of Sexualised Behaviours

Judging if Sexualised Behaviour is Causing Concern

- Any Sexualised behaviour is cause for concern when it...
 - Elicits complaints from other children
 - Does not respond to correction
 - When it is part of a pattern of behaviour that suggests the child does not understand boundaries

What to Do if Sexualised Behaviour Appears Normal

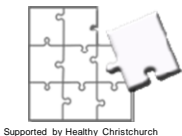
- Although within normal range, it may be inappropriate within a school setting
- When it does – any response should teach boundaries and the difference between private and public behaviour
- Name – “I saw you pull your pants down in the playground”
- Respond – “It’s not ok to pull our pants down at school”. “That’s not what anyone does at school”
- Document the incident and inform parents – encourage them to reinforce the same message at home

**Level
1**

What to Do if Sexualised Behaviour is Concerning

- Response should encourage clear communication, help the child develop empathy and promote accountability
- Confront using a strong tone
- “It is never OK to talk that way to anyone at school”
- “It is not respectful to say that to anyone”
- “This is not the first time you have used this language or behaviour and it needs to stop”
- “How do you think Lucy feels when you say or do thins”
- Prohibit the behaviour or set limits – give the student a consequence or explain to the what will happen if they do it again – “this behaviour must stop”
- Support students who have been harmed
- Document the incident and inform the principal

**Level
2**



What to Do if Sexualised Behaviour is Concerning – cont.

- Staff should work with the child to develop a 'playing safely plan'
- Inform parents – encourage their involvement in the safety and support plan
- Consult with other professionals i.e. STOP, child's counselor

**Level
2**

What to Do if Sexualised Behaviour is a Serious Concern

- For sexual behaviour that causes serious concern and can not be managed safely by school-based interventions
- Staff should continue to name, respond, confront and administer consequences
- Ensure student(s) that was harmed gets the necessary support
- Take immediate steps to ensure the safety of the student and others – increase supervision
- Report and refer – explain to the student that you will be telling their parents and seeking special help for them
- Document the incident and report to the principal
- Inform parents – if CYFS need to be notified, check first before informing parents
- Seek assistance for the student from a mental health professional who has experience in the area of sexualised behaviour
- Develop a safety and support plan in collaboration with school staff, parents and other professionals
- Follow up and monitor the safety and support plan
- If there are concerns that other children are at risk from this child's behaviour then the matter needs to be reported to CYFS who will provide support to the child and their family, and if necessary assist with access to services

**Level
3**

Referring to a Specialist Agency – Why it's Beneficial

- Intervention often requires a level of specialist knowledge
- Private practitioners focus on individual sessions only
- Generalisation of skills
- Can help repair rifts between families and schools
- Specialists can up-skill parents on the influence of sexualised environments
- Intervention by specialists appear to work!