



NATP
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF THERAPEUTIC PARENTS



Centre of Excellence in
CHILD TRAUMA

NATP Factsheet

Inappropriate Sexualised Behaviour (child trauma)

Safe Sexual Interest and Development

Sexualised behaviour is a fact of human development, beginning with exploration of our own bodies, extending to interest in other people's bodies (especially the opposite gender) and leading into naming body parts, finding sexual organs (and all private functions such as poo and wee) extremely interesting and absolutely hilarious and then gradual emerging of sexuality involving experimentation with our peers, peer group discussions, and secretive fact finding. (You can find charts about the development of age-related sexual behaviour in the NSPCC website given below). It is important to remember that sexualised behaviour has a natural and healthy role to play in the physical development of a young person, and this would be in the context of a safe, attuned and loving environment, with appropriate values and guidelines based around the family and community the child grows up in. For instance, the child would be supported to understand what is and is not appropriate language and behaviour, protected from harmful material and images and encouraged to learn at an early age that some areas of their body are private to them, and that those are the areas usually covered by underwear.

Inappropriate Sexualised Behaviours

Bearing in mind the guidelines for what is "normal" knowledge and understanding of sexualised behaviour, we then may find that we have areas for concern due to behaviour that is developmentally or socially inappropriate:

- Acting in a way that seems sexually provocative at an inappropriate age
- Having clear and inappropriate knowledge of the sexual act demonstrated in play, in drawings, in speech or in attempting to re-enact the sexual act with peers or with younger children or demonstrating this with toys.
- Exposing genitals publicly
- Public masturbation

- Inappropriate touching
- Using sexual violence or threats

The Guardian have reported that teachers across the board are concerned by the “rise in sexual language and behaviour in children as young as five.” (Karen McVeigh and Sarah Marsh, “**Sexualised behaviour in very young children increasing, say teachers**” Monday 12 September 2016)

Factors influencing Inappropriate Sexualised Behaviours

- **History of Sexual Abuse**

Research shows a strong link between children experiencing abuse and neglect and inappropriate sexualised behaviours. Two thirds of instances of inappropriate sexualised behaviour had a traumatic background, with half of these having suffered sexual abuse. Children that have been subjected to sexual abuse have been denied the usual stages of normal sexual development and have been either exposed to inappropriate language, images and film or been forced to participate in full or partial sexual acts with adults, peers or siblings. They may have been photographed, filmed or handed round a paedophile ring. Such children may have learned that sexual activity was a way to gain approval from or pacify adults. It may be hardwired as a way to survive. There will have been no way for them to understand the strong hormonal and emotional content that comes with a sexual encounter, and they may have an extremely confused concept of love and sex.

- **Gender**

Both boys and girls who have experienced early trauma as described above may go on to display inappropriate sexualised behaviours.

- **Developmental delay**

Where a child or young person has impaired cognitive, emotional or social areas of development, this can clearly render them vulnerable either to grooming or to committing inappropriate acts themselves. For instance, they may be drawn into a sexual act because it is expected and they do not know how to say no, or they may assault another child as their hormonal and physical development drives their sexual urges in inappropriate directions.

- **Vulnerability**

Unfortunately, the most vulnerable in the community – the disabled, those with a mental health or a learning disability can often be most at risk.

- **Internet**

The universal accessibility of the internet connected to smart phones, kindles, tablets etc means that young people have more access than ever before to online porn, and there has been a huge increase in sexting – sending and sharing pornographic materials. This may also be driven by peer pressure and the excitement of finding out about forbidden activities.

Strategies

- **Communication**

First and foremost, keep a clear and open communication with your children so that they are able to tell you what is happening to them. Try to be curious, non-judgemental and supportive. Your relationship and connection with your child are their best safety net. Basically, there is a choice. Be open with your children and ensure their knowledge is contained within your own beliefs and values or be prepared for them to find out for themselves by means of peer talk or via the internet.

- **Information**

Make sure your children have developmentally appropriate materials which should be available for them to look at themselves as well as maybe looking through them with you. One such book is “let’s talk about sex” (Walker Books: Robie Harris, 2010) is an excellent well written resource which covers all aspects of puberty, bodily development, sexuality and relationships. The 2010 edition also has a chapter on sex and internet safety.

- **Risk Assess**

Use your knowledge of your individual child to minimise risks to them. This might include personal boundaries, safe touch, appropriate supervision – in some cases it may be advisable to have professional advice and follow their guidelines. Communicate what you are putting in place and your reasons for this to your child or children.

- **Internet safety**

Unfortunately, the prevalence of smart tech and network availability makes it very difficult to completely safeguard our children, however, XX aware (website below) gives really good step by step instructions to place restrictions on your child’s devices and your home internet. Word of warning: Our children are very good at disabling apps and reinstating them, so you need to check regularly; plus of course they will use other children’s devices. Another reason why your relationship and communication are all important.

Websites

Kieran McGrath – Understanding sexualised behaviour in children & adolescents This pdf explains some of the reasons why children will adopt sexualised behaviours.

<http://www.cari.ie/images/uploads/pictures/Understanding%20%26%20Managing%20Sexualised%20Behaviour%20in%20Children%20%26%20Adolescents.pdf>

NSPCC – Healthy Sexual behaviour This site gives an overview of normal sexual behaviour, what to look for, and what to do about it with links giving information about such subjects about grooming and online porn. <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/healthy-sexualbehaviour-children-young-people/>

NSPCC – Harmful Sexual behaviour This guide gives an overview of harmful sexual behaviour, how and why it can occur, what to look for and some agencies that can help. <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/harmful-sexualbehaviour/>

Parents Protect – Parents guide This is a really useful downloadable with information and ideas about how to manage.

https://www.parentsprotect.co.uk/files/Parents%20Pack_Whats%20the%20problem_11Mar2015.pdf

XXXAware This site gives step by step instructions on how to set up parental controls on a range of broadband providers and tech products and is very user friendly. One stop shop for parental controls. <http://www.xxxaware.co.uk/>