



## Responding to Children with Sexual Behavior Problems: For Parents

It can be startling for a parent to realize that their child is engaging in a problematic sexual behavior. Parents may experience a range of emotions, including frustration, disbelief, or anger. It is important to understand that sexual behavior problems are treatable with the right response and intervention.

The [American Academy of Family Physicians \(bit.ly/AAFP\\_SBP\)](https://www.aafp.org/press-room/2014/0707sbp.html) defines problematic sexual behavior as sexual acts that are either developmentally inappropriate or intrusive, and usually involve coercion or distress. Actions that may suggest a sexual behavior problem include a young child attempting to kiss an adult's genitals, children of widely different ages showing or touching each other's genitals, or placing objects in sexual body parts. For more information on common and uncommon sexual behaviors in children, see MNCASA's Sexual Development in Children fact sheet.

Included below are a few key pieces of guidance for parents of children with sexual behavior problems, specifically if you discover your child engaging in sexual behavior or play that may be concerning:

1. Stop the behavior that the child is presently engaged in. If multiple children are involved, separate the children and speak with each one individually.
2. Talk with the child about the behavior they were engaging in. Define the behavior, and explain to the child clearly that what they were doing was inappropriate.

- a. During this conversation, it is important to not use language that would cause the child to feel shame. For example, refrain from saying: “that’s nasty/naughty.” Instead, provide support and correction. For example, “this is ok, but this is not a behavior we engage in public, only in private, and this is not a private space.”
  - b. Use this opportunity to teach the child what behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate for them. Redirect the child’s behavior by telling them when this specific behavior would be appropriate, and why it is not appropriate at this time
3. It can be helpful to have house rules or expectations that promote personal space, boundaries, and privacy, such as only one person in the bathroom at a time, or if a door is closed, knock and wait for permission to enter.

These steps can help you to address potentially problematic behavior quickly and with care. If the behavior seems beyond a caregiver’s capacity, it is important to consult a qualified professional. Your child’s primary care provider or a mental health professional with knowledge of child development, mental health issues, or sexual behaviors will likely be able to help in the evaluation and treatment of your child’s sexual behavior problem. [Psychology Today \(psychologytoday.com/us\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us) can assist you in finding a qualified professional in your area.