

## The prevention of sexual abuse of young children

*A developmental approach to understanding the sexual behaviour of young children, the nature of sexual abuse and how to minimise the risks by teaching protective behaviours.*

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## Introduction

This essay describes briefly the extent and nature of the sexual abuse problem as it relates to young children. It describes how sexual abuse can be seen as a continuum, with naïve sexual behaviours of children with other children at one end and criminal paedophilia at the other. It then sheds light on how adults can be drawn into sexual activity with children they already know. All children have the beginning of sexual behaviours in babyhood and are learning about sexuality from others from that time on. These developmental sexual behaviours of children up to the age of seven are described along with how we can work with them to keep our children safe, with matter of fact talk about privacy, personal boundaries and the right to feel safe. It then deals with the child-to-child end of the sexual abuse spectrum.

This essay does not deal with serious adult sexual exploitation and abuse of children as this is well covered elsewhere. However all adults should inform themselves about the signs of

sexual abuse as they appear in children's behaviour, and the frequency and seriousness of abuse of both boys and girls.

A quick introduction to this can be found in an excellent, fact filled talk by Freda Briggs on YouTube titled *Protect your children with disability from sexual abuse* in 6 parts (found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnK4m4c\\_EYM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnK4m4c_EYM) as long as this link remains viable). This talk refers particularly to the increased risk for children with disabilities but is an informative introduction for everyone. Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs is an international expert on Child Protection and co-author of *Teaching children to protect themselves* (Freda Briggs and Michael McVeity, Allen and Unwin 2000) – I highly recommended this book for those wanting more information on this subject. For those with Internet access a search for 'indicators of sexual abuse in children' will bring up many sources of helpful information. In Australia, government websites are good places to start.

## Understanding sexual abuse

### Prevalence of abuse

If adults are to be able to protect children against inappropriate touch and sexual abuse, they must have some understanding of its extent and who it involves. Children across all ages, both genders, all social classes, races, religions and ethnicities are at risk of sexual abuse, with one in five being abused and only about 15% of sexual abuse of children being perpetrated by strangers to the child. This high rate of sexual abuse includes a broad range of abuse but possibly not that of those whose abuse was serious enough for the child to

completely repress the memories of it. It should also be noted that while most abuse is perpetrated by males, women also abuse and there is some evidence to suggest that when women abuse young children the negative effects are considerable.

In protecting children, it is useful to consider all those situations where touch is inappropriate and has the potential to lead to more serious forms of abuse and exploitation. If you yourself have suffered abuse, is helpful to consider how this came about. If you have not, it is also

helpful to consider the times when it might have been different if you had been younger, smaller, weaker, more naïve, less articulate or less powerful. For example, what if the five-year-old child had not refused to cooperate with the visitor to her neighbour's house, who offered her jelly beans in return for allowing him to put his hand down her pants? What if an adult had not happened to come in when a group of adolescents had a nine year old boy cornered in the toilets? What if the driving instructor who put his hand on the thigh of the girl learning to drive, had turned off the road onto a reserve? It is also useful to consider the circumstances of your first sexual experience with another person, and, if this occurred when you were under-age, whether this actually did constitute abuse.

The high incidence of abuse means that there must be many people in our community who have sexually abused one or more people, even taking into account those who repeat offend. It reveals a continuum of abuse, where naïve or accidental sexual arousal is not dealt with in mature ways and develops into more and more serious and deliberate sexual abuse. Many of these people who have abused others sexually

### *Historical and cultural factors*

For thousands of years the more powerful have sexually abused the less powerful – children and other vulnerable groups (slaves, servants, indigenous peoples, women etc.) as part of normal treatment of those whom they considered inferior. It has only been in the last two hundred years, with growing awareness of every human being's individual rights, that the rights of children and their need for protection (including protection against sexual abuse) has been increasingly recognised and legislated for. Yet sexual abuse is still widespread, despite

may be ordinary people who may also have been sexually abused themselves. They may feel terrible guilt and sorrow about what they did in the past or they may have used other survival tactics to live with themselves with a clear conscience – denial, justification or rationalisation (“It wasn’t anything serious”, “I was young then and didn’t know better”, “but they asked for it” or “They enjoyed it!”).

Adults are always ultimately responsible for their own behaviour and for what they encourage in children, but if we want to understand how it is that sexual abuse is so prevalent, we need to acknowledge all the factors in making it so. Things are made more complicated where children themselves have been flirtatious, or are naturally sensuous or responsive to sensual or sexual touch.

Early ‘sexualisation’ of children because of sexualised clothes and toys, accessibility to information and Internet porn and many other factors, add to the complexity of the situation. All of this suggests that there is a lack of clarity or acceptance in our own culture about what is abusive and harmful. We need to understand it all better if we are to protect our children.

strengthened legislation, public awareness campaigns in the last 30 years, more information being available on the damage sexual abuse causes and protective behaviour strategies being taught in schools.

Cultural traditions about what is appropriate sexual touching are diverse. For example, in some areas in the world, kissing as part of love making is seen as gross and unacceptable. In western culture we consider it otherwise, for we see kissing as a beautiful and tender activity. In some cultures it was seen as acceptable for the

parents to stroke their very young children in the genital area as a way of calming and soothing them. In our culture, a parent touching penis or vulva in this way can be accused of sexual abuse. Self pleasuring/masturbation is accepted in some cultures but others, like Victorian England (and its colonies), considered it destructive and evil and punished it in cruel ways (albeit often with good intentions). Our own western culture today is still experiencing the flow-on effects of this Victorian influence,

despite the liberalisation in the last century. The taboos from the past, passed down by our grandparents, parents and the influential people in our childhoods (teachers and religious leaders) still flow into our unconscious behaviours and may conflict with our conscious adult choices. With increasing globalisation and movement of different cultures through migration, the conflicts between differing traditions is more apparent and more confronting.

### *The effects of liberalisation of sexual attitudes and behaviours*

Of course it follows that modern cultural movements are also having their effect on us. The liberalisation of child rearing practices with the the new approaches of child advocates like Benjamin Spock and Arnold Gesell in the '50s, accompanied by the wide availability of new forms of contraception, brought a liberalisation in sexual attitudes and behaviours in the Baby Boomer generation.

Post modernism and its philosophical deconstruction of moral absolutes in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has also crept its way into liberal parenting, sometimes with worrying consequences for children. Many parents do not want to repress the natural curiosity and enthusiasms of young children or the freedoms of older children. They do not want to dictate their own moral values in the area of sexuality; they do not want to make their children prudish or embarrassed by natural functions (as the parents may still be themselves). While these are fine ideals, when they are carried through without also creating clear boundaries for children (about what is appropriate for both the physical self and for social/cultural norms), this laissez-faire approach can leave children more open to sexual abuse. It needs to be very clear to children what are private parts of their bodies,

what is private activity, and that privacy is about healthy protection of one's own boundaries and safety, not about secrecy or anything shameful.

There seems to be an over-estimation of the capacity for young children to think these things out for themselves. Children certainly learn from the environment around them and if information is not provided by the parents it will be deduced from the next available information. If the child is not told a baby comes out through the vagina, a three year old will often guess it comes out of the belly button—a pretty good guess really! If the parents do not teach their children about the subtle rules of private and public, the children may assume that anything goes, anywhere and this puts the children at risk— which is quite the opposite of what the parents intended. Our very specific guidance around sexual behaviours is essential to children; it is the key to their healthy growth and parents need to take it on courageously.

Pornography must also be mentioned as an increasingly prominent new influence on our children. While pornography has existed previous to the Internet, it has never been so widely available nor so pernicious as it is now.

In relation to young children, a new Australian study reports children as young as five are being exposed to porn – mostly accidentally. Such exposure is sufficient to stimulate children to play out the observed sexual activity in order

to understand what they have seen and so begins the sexual abuse of the observing child as well as those children he or she involves in the play.

## *Factors that lead to child abuse*

### *Poor personal boundaries*

Parents need to consider the nature of touch between their children and their immediate and extended family and friends. Most sexual abuse takes place in this circle and there is much denial concerning it. It is possible that some of the inappropriate touching which occurs in this circle begins because of ignorance, insensitivity and lack of good personal boundaries in adults. Most people have experienced touch from people who do not seem to be able to sense whether touch is appropriate or not—they hug too close, too hard, too long; they stand too close; they kiss on the lips when not appropriate, or they kiss with an open mouth; they touch too much; they make us feel uncomfortable and we often want to keep more distance from them. They may be well meaning good people but they have poor personal boundaries. Some of them may have been sexually abused themselves and give out mixed messages in their touch.

If you know you have been sexually abused yourself or know you have loose personal boundaries, you may have to observe yourself to check what you are modelling about personal boundaries to your own children. Ask for feedback about this from people you trust and feel safe with.

It is clear that if we are concerned about the welfare of our children and the adults they will become, when discussing personal boundaries we should be teaching children to protect themselves and teaching them to not abuse others. As we teach children about healthy boundaries, we need to include talking about respecting other people's boundaries as well. We need to teach them about taking responsibility for their own and others' wellbeing. Everything we teach them in relation to this also strengthens their defences against all kinds of abuse and prepares them for healthier sexual relationships later.

### *Physiological responses to touch – inadvertent arousal*

Our bodies are designed physiologically to respond to sexual touch. The penis can become hard from accidental touch and arouse sexual feelings. The touching of breasts can result in sexual arousal. The rubbing of the clitoris on a bike seat can be sexually arousing. These things are natural and should be able to be comfortably

acknowledged. Inadvertent touch by children of adults' erotic zones can stimulate a bodily sexual response in the adult which needs to be met with objectivity and maturity.

Perhaps if we were more open about these externally and accidentally stimulated 'bodily arousals', we would be better at dealing with

them. In a society which reacts with blame for such sexual responses it does not leave much room to talk about them. Mothers who breastfeed their babies can experience such feelings but in this situation we just accept it, even as one of the unspoken pleasures of loving our babies. One man described how the siblings of his girlfriend had tickled him as they played and had aroused a bodily sexual response in him; he told them "You'd better stop that or you will wake up the dragon!" Tickling and play fighting are times when sexual bodily responses can be easily aroused. It is when an adult or older child lets these feelings of sexual arousal lead to further inappropriate touch, that we enter the sexual abuse continuum. Whether through immaturity, lack of intelligence, lack of self control or absence of feelings of responsibility and care for the child, continuing

inappropriate sexual touch becomes sexual abuse.

When the physiological function of touch is used deliberately to create sexual arousal (essentially tricking a child into initially accepting inappropriate touch) and then this arousal is used to justify further abuse, it is particularly insidious. Children then blame themselves for letting it happen. Because their bodies enjoyed it initially, and perhaps because they enjoyed the attention (and perhaps other bribes which came with it), they can feel guilt and confusion when it becomes something more difficult to deal with, in more serious abuse. This is why ongoing sexual abuse by those people the child trusted, like relatives, family friends, teachers or priests, is so much more devastating than a one off sexual attack by a stranger, where the crossing of the boundary is very clear.

### *Identifying what is abuse—the abuse continuum*

What is not so often covered when discussing sexual abuse is this subtle slide into abuse from relatively innocent touch, to ignorant touch, to uncontrolled urges, to premeditated seductive predatory touch. It is this continuum which creates such confusion for parents who are having to deal with a variety of factors; the developmental sexual behaviours of children in relation to touching and being touched by others, the need to teach appropriate behaviours (for our individual situation as well as the demands of cultural norms), the need for appropriate responses when a child's touch initiates an inadvertent sexual response in ourselves, and the behaviour of those around us which may be compromised regarding personal boundaries. At the extreme, we must also be aware of predatory behaviour in people who

insinuate themselves into children's lives with the intent of having access to our children sexually.

These are all relevant because they impact on how we teach children to protect themselves against sexual abuse. The clearer we are on all the factors involved the better. Who? Where? And Why? No one has difficulty with condemning the predatory sexual abuse of strangers. It is the other end of the sexual touch continuum, the initially innocent touch which creates the conflict. It is the touch driven by curiosity between children and siblings, the uncomfortable fondling touch by parents and family members and friends which creates confusion, denial and gets in the way of straight talk about inappropriate, unwanted, sexual touch.

We need to understand better how so many ordinary people can end up abusing children. Poor personal boundaries and lack of clarity about what is appropriate touch, in combination with ignorance, egotism, neurotic needs for power and love, and/or lack of sufficient control over sexual urges and fantasies, can all lead to

inappropriate touching of children, possibly starting innocently but growing into more disturbing and harmful behaviours. Again it is this slide into something more sinister that can be hard to label, believe and stop within families.

## *Helping young children to keep themselves safe*

### *The role of parents in teaching children protective behaviours*

Teaching children how to keep themselves safe ideally starts with parents and is then complemented by others caring for the children. Parents are in the best position to teach children about privacy and safety on an ongoing basis, to recognise risk factors, and to pick up cues that children may be being distressed by other people's behaviour towards them or actually being sexually abused by them. While schools now have Keeping Ourselves Safe or Protective Behaviours programmes in place for slightly older children, the foundations for optimising the effects of these school programmes lies in the ongoing education parents give at home to children as they grow up.

While we need to be very clear that young children under seven need absolute protection from adults, from a very young age we can be educating our children about their bodies, about privacy, personal boundaries and about keeping themselves safe. Throughout childhood we gradually empower them to take responsibility for themselves so that by the time they are teens and off on their own for a large part of the time, they have safety strategies as part of their ways of working.

Clearly, the more we understand about children's development and their natural

healthy curiosity about their bodies, the more we can give them appropriate information for their age. We can also meet the children with a calm acceptance of their sexual curiosity (rather than be affronted by it) at the same time as teaching about what touch is appropriate, where and with whom.

What compounds children's confusion about all this is our own adult confusion about genitals, excretory functions, reproductive functions and private erotic sexual activity. We have muddled them altogether as a result of our western cultural heritage and taboos. It is important that we separate these out once again if we want our children to have a healthy understanding of their bodies and clear guidelines for appropriate behaviours.

We need to be clear about what should be talked about with young children regarding elimination and reproductive anatomy, about our sensitive erogenous zones and sexual behaviours. We also need to find ways and language to talk about these things. We then have the means to teach protective behaviours and how to keep our children safe from sexual abuse.

## *Straight talk about private parts and their functions.*

Finding the language to talk comfortably about sexuality is the first step in teaching children about their bodies, keeping safe and sexuality. Unfortunately adult embarrassment frequently sabotages such teaching because many people are unclear about what is really just anatomical education as distinct from what is erotic adult sexuality, which belongs in later sex education. Most people have no trouble in telling children that “play blocks are used in the play corner and are not thrown around the room or at the windows. We keep them in the block basket” Unfortunately a lot of people do have trouble with saying “The penis and vulva are private parts of ourselves which are used in private places like the bathroom. We do not play with them in other places or with other people and we keep them in our pants.” This reluctance to speak clearly and openly about genitalia and naïve sexual behaviours and to create clear rules about them causes problems and confusion. We aim here to bring more clarity to this for parents, teachers and carers.

We also need to be clear that some parts of the body are ‘private’ and ‘special’ versus ‘secret’, ‘bad’ or ‘yuk’ etc. A start can be made in using specific anatomical terms for the part of our bodies, along with affectionate terms if parents want to use them as well. Of course a penis can be called a ‘little willie’, so long as both can be used comfortably in conversation. When we have clear terminology we are better able to name the behaviours that cross the line of affection and become abusive.

As a start, to get more comfortable with matter of fact talk about our bodies, consider the following areas which need to be talked about with children, and the age at which such a talk is needed and appropriate. Since some people have great difficulty talking about these things

to children in a natural matter of fact way, I will write it in a way you could use when talking to children, with examples of what can be said. I will then look in more detail at children’s sexual development and how this guides us to providing them with ways to keep themselves safer:

**The mouth:** Sexual abuse often involves the mouth, so children should be taught that their mouths are also private places which others do not interfere with, except of course, for keeping their teeth clean and healthy.

**Elimination functions.** Children are learning about elimination functions from babyhood. Children need to be told that bowel motions/faeces and urine, poo and wee or whatever affectionate terms you want to call them, are the function of our wise bodies, to get rid of unwanted matter we really don’t need any more. We don’t handle them because they are very smelly and, after all, our body does not want them either.

Tiny children themselves need to be affirmed as loved while the smelly poos are being removed, even if you have a laugh together about how smelly it is today. “What a smelly one that is” (as you throw the nappy in the bucket) “But you are my gorgeous boy!”

Around two to three when children are concerned about potty training and poos, and may be scared of toilets, we can give them more information. “We give our poos and wees back to the earth via the toilet and the potty (and sometimes even a pee in the garden). Yes, when they go down the toilet they have a very long journey down many tunnels, but eventually they come out in a very large pond with reeds and rushes and

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bushy trees full of little birds making the loudest twittering you ever heard."

"The anus is the little hole in our bottom where our body lets the poo out. We don't put our finger in there, oh no, it might meet some poo coming out, then we would be very smelly, for sure."

Curiosity in the bath and getting the pee in the toilet: "The penis is where the urine comes out when you want to pee, if you are a boy or a man. Even a tiny tiny baby boy has a penis. Daddy calls it a willie, but it is a funny little fellow which has a lot of names. It gets big when you stroke it, as you know from the bath. It has a little door to stop the pee coming out when it needs to, when it has another job to do. It is really very clever because you can help it to put your pee right in the toilet where it belongs."

"Girls and women have a little hole where their wee comes out of the urethra. They can't make it big, like the willie, but they also have another special hole behind it called a vagina, which is the little tunnel which leads to the baby house where the baby grows when the little girl grows up and becomes a Mummy. That is a very special place for a girl. We don't put fingers in there either."

At Five and Six, children really like to see for themselves and find out about what is down there in their pants. They are interested in all sorts of elimination processes, including vomit. ("That's the wise body's way of getting rid of things very quickly.") Talk of wees and poos bring great giggles and little jokes. If children are not well informed there can be confusion later about where the urine comes from. Whether the urine comes from the vagina and if they do not know that in a man the tube from the urethra closes to allow the sperm through the penis. Be ready for the

question later when the question of sperm comes up.

Now is a good time to add more to the picture they have of their private parts. You may want to add that "Little boys also have two testicles, calls balls for fun, in a little sack called the scrotum. After boys are born sometimes the testicles take six months to come down into their little sack, and sometimes they have to be helped along."

You may need to confirm again with the girls that the urine comes out of the urethral opening, the hole between the vagina and the clitoris. "Girls have a little clitoris which peeks out of its folds at the front." "All of this part of you is protected by folds we call the labia which help to keep us clean and moist and comfortable, and hide our private parts away, keeping them from harm." "So girls have a vulva, with all those special places hidden away inside, and boys have a penis and scrotum out for all to see, until they keep them inside their underpants!" "We have to take care of all of these parts of ourselves, in boys and in girls, and we do that by not letting other people touch us there."

Clearly they need to have the rule about private parts and privacy re-stated with their intensified curiosity at this age. Not only should it be made clear that we don't let others touch us in our private places but also that another person (child or adult) should not ask to touch our genitals. Lack of such basic instruction can lead to emotionally painful situations between children, even in the kindergarten community.

**Breasts** Curiosity about breasts comes particularly strongly at Three and Four. "Yes, Mummy's breasts are big for feeding babies and the nipple is made just the right size for a baby to be able to suck, just like you did. When a baby comes, the breasts grow very

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big to have milk for the baby.” Do Daddies have breasts? “Well they just have the nipples, like you do, perhaps just in case they were going to be mummies, but then they weren’t, so their breasts did not grow any more because they didn’t need them.”

**Reproductive functions**, like menstruation, can be talked about when it arises but certainly Five and Six year olds will be observing what goes on. Blood on pants and pads, tampons are often spotted and need unembarrassed explanations. “You know how Mummy has a vagina that goes to the baby house where you grew in her tummy? It is such a cosy warm little place for a baby; it’s called a womb, or a uterus. But of course it can’t have a baby in it all the time. Oh dear no, we wouldn’t have anywhere to put so many babies. But the womb needs to be always ready for the time a baby might come to live in it, so every month it has spring clean, to make a new bed ready, and the old bed comes away through the vagina as special blood and Mummy has her period. Sometimes Mummy gets tired from all that work preparing a new bed, and gets a little cranky with us for a bit. We have to help her more and let her have a little rest then. When you grow up a bit more you will have a period too, and we will look after you too at your special time each month. It is a special time for a girl when she gets her first period.” “We use pads and tampons to catch the special blood that comes in a period.” “Sometimes we call this by a big word — menstruation.”

Young children don’t need to be told the full details about human reproduction and sexual intercourse yet. They are still confused by the idea of seeds being planted (do the leaves grow out Mummy’s ears?) They are happy with simple explanations like Mummy and Daddy made you with their love. But often

other children have been told quite young and they will tell everyone else and your children may come home with more concrete questions about the penis in the vagina. You can just be brief and matter of fact then, using the information you have already given them. “Yes, Daddy’s penis put his love seed in Mama’s vagina where it went looking for her love seed to make a tiny little body for you. And you grew and grew that little body in her womb and here you are.”

## **Sensual responsiveness, erogenous zones and masturbation**

Children are responsive to touch from birth and, left to themselves with few enough clothes on, they discover the most sensitive erogenous zones on themselves, the penis and the clitoris. The penis, being more readily available, is usually discovered more often and used most for comforting when the child is stressed, in masturbation. Some girls also discover that touching themselves around the clitoris is comforting or sitting on a ridge produces a good feeling between their legs. You need to talk about this too, in saying “touching yourself there is a private thing, done by yourself when you are on your own, and not by anyone else.” That’s enough, just to reinforce the boundary of privacy. But you also may need to find the source of stress that is driving the child to find comfort in masturbation.

## **Adult sexual intercourse and associated activities.**

These are private, intimate activities and for older people only, so it is proper not to talk about them with young children unless you really have to because they have seen things they should not have seen. Observation of adult sexual intercourse by children constitutes abuse. Accidentally or deliberately exposing children to

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pornography also constitutes abuse. It can be very frightening for young children to observe such strange behaviour which sexual intercourse appears to be and which takes adults away from them and into their own world. It is little wonder that if they see adult sexual intercourse that they may play it out with their friends to make sense of it. Imitation of adult sexual behaviour by children needs discreet investigation and a restatement of privacy rules. More is said on this below.

So of all these areas, really only the last, speaking about adult sexual activity, is not appropriate to be talked about with young

## *The right to feel safe*

It is important to empower our children in dealing with and avoiding abuse. Part of teaching children about how to keep themselves safe is to teach them that they have the right to feel safe. This means they should feel they can say when they feel uncomfortable or unsafe and they will be listened to. They need to know they have the right to feel safe both physically and emotionally. For example, they need to know they don't have to stay near people with whom they feel unsafe, especially if they are alone. People with poor sexual boundaries or who show sleazy behaviour and sexual voyeurism around children can also damage a child's sense of trust in people of the other

children. Everything else can be talked about in a matter of fact, simple way, using concrete images they can understand. Adults may need to practice getting used to using descriptive words describing the anatomy of the physical body, anus, penis, scrotum, vulva, vagina, clitoris, menstruation, period. We should not be embarrassed by them or ashamed to use them with our children when they just need straight factual talk. Embarrassment and shame have confused the issues and meant we have often not kept our children safe, for want of straight talking about the private parts of ourselves and their functions.

sex. As parents therefore, it is important to listen to and respect your child's requests if they say they don't feel safe or seem reluctant to be close to particular people.

We need to make sure our children are strong, sensible and savvy, rather than fearful and therefore more vulnerable. Fear is initially a warning to us and should therefore never be dismissed or denied. But as parents we should be teaching our children strategies to help them avoid fear inducing situations. Excessive fear, with no strategies to work with for separating ourselves from the cause of the fear, breeds vulnerability and victimhood. Victimhood attracts attack. Understanding this is basic to protecting children.

## *Young children's sexual development and child initiated touching*

There are many sexual behaviours from children up to seven years which can affront the unprepared adult. Children's natural developmental curiosities and explorations, especially those around personal touch and

boundaries, very quickly create challenges to cultural taboos and norms for parents. So it is the children themselves who most often confront us first in their sexual behaviours rather than the behaviour of other adults.

From a young age (as soon as they can reach far enough) children discover they can calm or pleasure themselves by holding and rubbing themselves around the penis and vulva. Young children may also ask others to touch them, or want to touch others themselves, or inadvertently touch others. And so we have here the potential for sexual abuse beginning with innocent developmental curiosity, exploration and intention. As we have already said, it is the child initiated sexual behaviour on the abuse continuum, which helps to create confusion for adults in response to children's sexual behaviours and which needs greater clarity. It must be said again that there is no way that child initiated touch can justify inappropriate sexual touch in adults. We need to understand this in order to protect children. Sometimes we need to ask children and adults to restrain behaviours which are in themselves harmless but can lead to vulnerability and then abuse.

Our basic rule for young children is: *'Our private parts (mouth, breast, anus, genitals) are our own and other people don't touch them (except Mummy or Daddy or doctor in special circumstances, like keeping them clean and healthy and then only with respect and permission.) We also do not touch other people's private parts.'*

The rule needs to be this defined because young children, for various reasons, are not able to protect themselves against abusive touch reliably or sufficiently. Later, in adolescence, *'Touch only with respect and permission'* will be more appropriate as the rule for loving sexual touch of others.

Following the reality that children discover touch of their genitals is pleasurable, an example can illustrate the direction it can lead. A mother of an older toddler tells the story of how she was rubbing her little boy's tummy and

he took her hand and put it onto his penis, as if to say, "Stroke me here Mummy, it feels nice here too." She was confronted by this; her cultural norms said this sort of touch was wrong; yet was she to deny her child's innocent 'request' for this comforting touch? She decided to gently remove her hand and went on stroking him in 'more appropriate' (i.e. less private) places. Another parent might have responded differently.

If young children have had no indication otherwise from older children or adults, they would have no reason to not ask for pleasurable touch from others. Would it have been harmful if the mother had carried out her child's request? Gentle touch of the genitals of young children by a loving parent with unselfish intent would appear not to be harmful in itself. However if it continued as the child gets older, such touch conflicts with what we need to teach children to keep them safe: 'That our private parts are our own and other people don't touch them.'

When very young children play with each other in the bath, there is often play with the genitals of themselves and sometimes with other children—unless they have been told otherwise. This play arises out of innocent curiosity, the pleasure of touch and a sense of fun, especially about the things a little penis can do. Children aged two to four are exploring their gender identity, comparing what they look like, what they wear, how they urinate in toilets and outside. A lot of these behaviours involve just looking but can also involve touch. Our problem in allowing this touch once again models the opposite of what we need to teach them to prevent abuse. 'That our private parts are our own and other people don't touch them.' With young children within the family, parents may decide to allow respectful touch between very young siblings and use this to emphasise the

general rule, but making 'touch in our immediate family' the exception to the rule. Clarity and respect is important here.

In Two to Four year olds there is an emphasis of growth in the chest area, which seems to prompt a particular interest in breasts and belly buttons. It is the breast, as another 'erotic' private place, which creates the problem here. Children may be interested in the breasts and nipples of the mother and where the milk comes from. They may even ask to suckle the breast, especially if there is a baby in the house. Children who have had prolonged breastfeeding and open access to their mother's breasts can assume, if not told otherwise, that it is okay to touch the breasts of other women, baby sitters for example. Breasts need to be included as 'private parts' of our bodies.

Following the rule 'Touch private parts only with respect and permission,' a mother may allow her toddler to touch or suckle once more with a: "Well, Mummy's breasts are her own special private place, but you can touch them gently just this once the way you used to when you were little." The important thing is to reaffirm the personal boundary rule about privacy, respect and permission.

A teenage girl once told that her little two year old baby sitting charge had, in a sleepy state, put his hand down her shirt onto her breast (perhaps as he had done for comfort next to his mother as a late breast feeder?) She reported that she was shocked by the erotic feelings the child's touch produced. Such inadvertent child's touch producing a sexual response in the adult may be one of the ways abuse begins, when the adult response is not controlled and mature. Similarly, if the mother, for example, developed her own selfish motives for continuing the genital stroking, immediately the situation would be different.

Older Fives and Six year olds present adults with even more challenging behaviour. At this age the emphasis in their growth is in the lower abdomen and limbs and they show an obsessive interest in all things genital (penis, vulva, anus) and metabolic (vomit, fart, urine and faeces). By this time most children are beginning to recognise that there are taboos around genital touch, even if they have not been specifically told. Their knowledge about taboos may also drive their curiosity about them. Their imaginative play embraces areas which involves these private parts of the body and its functions and anything they have sensed adult taboos about. For example, they may play doctors and giving birth.

Their curiosity about their genitals leads to looking at and touching each other. They are quick to imitate any sexual behaviour they have seen. They may roll around on top of one another (across Australia an activity they call 'sexing'). They may lock themselves away in their bedrooms to explore in private what they sense (usually correctly) will not be approved of by adults.

Again the parent may be faced with the dilemma of not wanting to repress what is natural curiosity, not wanting to make their children puritanical or shy about their bodies yet having to deal with the behaviour. Here we are usually dealing with two children, most likely from different families, each with different values and attitudes. As a counsellor I have seen friendships between families bitterly split apart by one parent allowing sexual touching between children and the other being devastated by it and seeing it as abuse.

Many people have memories of such innocent explorations around this age and often may remember them more vividly because they were carried out surreptitiously out of the sight of the

adults. In itself, between two curious children about the same age, who are respectful with each other, such touching is not what is harmful but rather the ramifications that can come out of it—that it models that it is acceptable to be touched in the genital/private area by others.

If parents wish to allow the children to play out some scenarios which could involve exposure of private places—e.g. pretending to give birth—parents can use this as a time to re-iterate privacy and safety rules: respect, permission, the right to withdraw and say no etc.

Whispering/giggling in cubbies and behind closed doors are often an indication of such behaviours and the need to restate privacy rules.

By this age, because they are beginning to sense what the adult world in which they live disapproves of, they can suffer guilt over their play. Most are quick to recognise what is adult approved and what is not, even when nothing is said directly. Young children frequently blame themselves even when they are not to blame and this is a major cause of emotional damage in sexual abuse. When the child initiates the sexual touch, it may be that they feel guilty and this will make them more reluctant to 'tell'. When

children do not sense adult norms around sexuality, as in children with Asperger syndrome the problem is a different one, but of equal concern, as we shall see.

Towards the latter part of Six, sexual behaviours manifest in a slightly different way, less based on curiosity, more on a certain flirtatiousness between girls and boys, which again challenge teachers as well as parents. A rise in interest in the opposite sex seems to drive these teasing games—'kiss chasey', locking girls into cupboards, pulling pants down. While these games often start in innocent fun they are not acceptable. Parents and teachers need to restate firmly the inappropriateness of this crossing of personal boundaries, and each person's right to respect and privacy, and the necessity of permission being given, as well as emphasising the unacceptability of bullying.

So we see that the children may themselves reveal what needs to be taught to them regarding privacy, personal boundaries and appropriate touch and parents should not be shy in teaching it, just as they would teach safety around water or fire or playing with a cricket bat.

### *When touch between children becomes abusive*

There are two situations especially when touch between children can become abusive—firstly when there are differentials in power between children and secondly in the imitation of adult behaviours. Even between children of the same age, touch can become abusive when one child is more powerful than the other and intimidates the weaker one into cooperating or doing things he or she does not want to do. Similarly, if there is inappropriate touching by a disturbed child of the same age, or when a child who has been exposed to inappropriate adult sexual

behaviour tries to make sense of this through imitation and acting out the behaviour with another child. This play then falls into a completely different category and needs to be disallowed gently but firmly.

With the availability of sexual information, porn and more opportunities to observe adults in sexual behaviour (especially separated parents in new romantic relationships where hormones are very powerful, sometimes over-ride good parenting sense) many children observe behaviour they find hard to make sense of and

will try to play it out as their way of digesting it. When sexual play between young children goes beyond just looking and touching and proceeds to adult-like behaviours, for example the children stripping naked and the boy trying to put his penis into the girls vagina or one child requesting the other to kiss or put his penis into the other child's mouth, these are warning signs for parents. These are not developmental behaviours and may be signs of sexual abuse, including that of children not being protected appropriately from observing adult sexual behaviour (considered an abuse).

However before parents become anxious about this it should be remembered that children will imitate in play anything they do not understand to try to make sense of it. So such behaviours can be imitated in a line which can be many children away from the original source of abuse. It may not be the child who is initiating the behaviour who has observed adults having sexual intercourse, or who has been abused. It may be that that child got it from another, and he or she from another, up a line of contacts. The important thing for parents to do is to make clear that this sort of play is not allowed and then take note, observe, read up on other behaviours associated with sexual abuse, observe again and follow up clues. If your investigations lead to a child who is exhibiting many of the signs of abuse get professional advice on how to get help for that child. Professional people, like teachers and doctors, are often obliged to report such concerns to the appropriate authorities, under mandatory reporting laws and can help you get appropriate help. There is a lot of information on the Internet on recognising indicators of sexual abuse and where to go. Government websites are a good place to start.

Any sexual touching of breasts and genitals is considered inappropriate when there is an age differential of more than a few years between the children, or when it done by or to an adult. In these situations the touch is being done out of self interest/power rather than a commitment to the wellbeing of the child being touched (as in the case of the mother being led to touch the penis of her little boy had she not returned to stroking his stomach, or the simple developmental curiosity between equal aged children). One exception to this touch being motivated by power could possibly be the naïve curious touch of a child who is older and has never been taught about healthy personal boundaries and has difficulty sensing them. Here it is done in ignorance.

Most children will pick up intuitively what is vaguely acceptable to adults, and what is not in regards to sexual touching, but children with difficulty in reading the nuances of people's behaviour, like children with Asperger syndrome or with intellectual disabilities may well miss the cues. These children are more at risk of being abused themselves as well as of innocently abusing others. However, regardless of their motive, the sexual touching between children of different ages is inappropriate. It is the responsibility of adults to teach these children appropriate boundaries, but to also be careful that the children are not stigmatised for their inability to understand the inappropriateness of some touch. Children with physical disabilities are also less able to defend themselves. Freda Briggs has written a book specifically on helping all these children (*Teaching Personal Safety Skills to Children with Disabilities*).

## *Adult responses to possible abuse.*

**Child to child touching.** Firstly, and very importantly, in the interests of young children's wellbeing, it is best to keep any adult response low key to inappropriate but non-traumatic sexual touching by a same age or an older child, especially if it has been 'only' curiosity driven.

Over-reaction by parents can make such an encounter traumatic and end up doing more harm than good. What is important is that in a calm and gentle way both children are told that the touch was inappropriate and why.

Especially when one child is younger, or the power relationship between the children is unequal, or one was reluctant to be involved, the child needs to be told that the touch was not only inappropriate but also that they have a right to say "No" to this and be safe. The older child needs to be brought to understand the inappropriateness of such touch and that they have to respect other children's saying "No".

Sex play between same age children can involve the willingness of both children if they have not been given clear guidelines, but it is often the instigator who takes all the blame, even though this child may never have been told what is inappropriate either. Both children particularly need to know that they have a right to say "No" to abuse of themselves by another person.

Parents need to understand that they have to take responsibility to tell their children that it is inappropriate to both *give* and *receive* such touch and that children should always tell parents about such inappropriate touch being requested. Although it is not easy for parents to hear, the reality is that often the child who has been abused by other children has not been given

clear guidelines either. Other children with a strong sense of their own boundaries may well have already said no to this child initiating the inappropriate behaviour, so that the child went on looking for someone who would say 'yes' or at least allow the behaviour.

If the children involved are friends, as they usually are, and it is possible for the instigator or an older child to reassure the other child that it will not happen again, this can bring healing to the situation. But such a reassurance must come from the heart and not be forced. There must be trust in this.

Even in the case of serious abuse, it is best to keep calm in the presence of the child. It must be remembered that young children will blame themselves and over-reaction can make the children feel guilty for what they see was their part in it. Over-reaction by parents can actually make such an encounter traumatic for both the children involved and can have a divisive effect on the community and the children's friendships. It can result in the stigmatising of children and families, whether or not there is serious abuse occurring, whether or not the child can really be blamed for the incident.

As we have said before, children involved in inappropriate sexual touching should be observed for other signs of sexual abuse and professional help sought if you are concerned. Suspected serious sexual abuse reported under mandatory reporting laws should be investigated by professionals trained to do so with discretion.

## *Difference in individual children & ages.*

All children need the nourishment of gentle caring touch and we therefore do not want to deprive them of touch in order to keep them safe. Children differ in their propensity to touch and their wish to be touched. Tactile, sensuous children are far more likely to seek out touch from older children and adults. They need more 'touch' to experience the world more fully, as other children may need to 'see' or 'hear' or 'move' in the world. These children also need more touch for reassurance. They are more likely to climb on your lap, ask for hugs, take your hand, etc. This makes these children more vulnerable to abusive touch. Adults need to help them to understand even more clearly the rules about inappropriate touch and personal

boundaries and insist in these being respected. If these children are also given sufficient extra reassuring legitimate touch by parents and those close to them they are less likely to ask for touch from others or accept inappropriate touch.

Parents should also be aware that certain ages are also more vulnerable to sexual abuse; these are stages which are more amenable, where children are less likely to say "no" firmly, and also stages which seem to have more erotic tendencies. Of course stages where there is natural curiosity about genitalia are more vulnerable too. The Developmental profiles include information on the times more vulnerable to abuse. Check your children's age profiles in the *Child Development Profiles*.

## *Family Safety Guidelines for protection without fear*

Children clearly need extra help in protecting themselves against abuse – from very early on in their lives. However, they also need to know that their world is a place which is (ideally) safe and good. How then do we offer extra protection against abuse without scaring them and undermining their emotional wellbeing and their trust in others? The foundation for the strength to protect oneself against any sort of abuse lies in good self esteem. This is so for adults and children. We need to help children have deep self respect, inner strength and confidence, and a belief that they have the right to feel safe. But there are also other strategies parents can work with, like the Family Safety Guidelines.

These guidelines are designed specifically to help protect younger children against sexual abuse *without* having to talk about potential abuse and 'bad people' very directly with them.

The time will come for that when they are a little older in school. We suggest you put a copy of the guidelines up somewhere very visible in your house as well as making them part of your children's guidelines for living in everyday life. Explain to the people caring for your children that these are the guidelines you use in your house. This way it helps to discourage anyone with intentions to abuse from touching your children inappropriately.

As we have seen, most abuse (85%) is perpetrated by people whom children know within and around the family. If potential abusers know your family has these guidelines and that you carry through in making sure all the children know and understand them, they are more likely to look elsewhere for victims. You also help to define the boundaries of personal safety for the immature older children or adults, who might have confused sexual

reactions to children.

Remember though, that younger children and even older children cannot be relied upon to follow safety guidelines and procedures. After all, they are used to having to give way to adult authority, and are often punished if they don't. So all safety measures need to be put in place to protect children.

As children get older, and are out in the world without you (including for sleepovers), they will need to be given more specific information about what sexual abuse involves and how to deal with it. If young children are at high risk because of unavoidable circumstances, they may also have to be given more information, sooner than would otherwise be preferable.

### *Our Family Safety Guidelines*

- In our house feelings are important and may tell us what to do.
- We always have the right and deserve to feel safe.
- Privacy is respected. I am boss of my body.
- We always have the right to say no if we are asked to do something that we think is wrong or we do not understand.
- We do not keep bad secrets in our house, only good surprises.
- We have a loving circle of friends who would help us if we needed it.
- We can say NO and YES strongly when we mean it.
- We can be persistent to get what we need.
- We do not like bad tricks, bribes or blackmail in our house.

These guidelines address the common factors involved in sexual abuse of children and encourage behaviours which can help keep children safe. See Dr Freda Briggs' YouTube talks and books for more understanding of the basis for these guidelines, but here is an introduction to the background to them.

**In our house feelings are important and may tell us what to do.** This encourages children to listen to their feelings of discomfort, embarrassment or feeling that something is not right in someone's behaviour and to withdraw from a person or situation that makes them feel that way. You need to absolutely respect their responses here, even if it is embarrassing for you—for example that they don't want to be kissed by Aunt Carol or Uncle Jim or get undressed in

front of Grandpa. Children can be quite sensitive to inappropriate behaviour in adults who squeeze their cheeks hard, pat their heads condescendingly, or hug too close. You need to support them in listening to their feelings or they will not listen to them when they really need to. They also need to be able to say they don't want hugs and kisses from you too, just because they don't want it. No other reason than that. No one has the right to 'take' hugs and kisses, not even you. This teaches them that feelings of vulnerability, reluctance and repugnance and doubt should be listened to.

**We always have the right and deserve to feel safe.** This is a rule which is useful for teaching children about safety all the way through childhood and to problem solve

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ways to make them feel safer. They can often tell you what they need, if you are willing to listen and help. "If you come with me..." "If Johnny is there..." "If I know I can call you to come to get me..." Parents need to learn to tune into what the signs are of their children feeling unsafe. It is not about a lack of courage. When feelings of 'unsafeness' is related to a particular person, be especially wary. Avoid leaving them with that person alone. They have the right to feel safe.

## **Privacy is respected. I am boss of my body.**

This of course goes with our rule already stated: *'Our private parts (including our mouths) are our own and other people don't touch them (except Mummy or Daddy or doctor in special circumstances like keeping them clean and healthy and then only with respect and permission.) We also do not touch other people's private parts.'* This also means respecting that they want to close the bathroom door, not be made to get undressed before another person and so on.

**We always have the right to say no if we are asked to do something that we think is wrong or we do not understand.** This is the rule on the list you might want to point out politely to people who care for your children. Our initial reaction might be that we want our children to do just what they are told to do and say "Be a good boy and do what Jenny tells you to do." But what if that involves something you don't want your child to do or that you have told them is wrong? A safer admonition might be: "Listen carefully to what Jenny tells you."

## **We do not keep bad secrets in our house, only good surprises**

It is suggested that we avoid the use of the word 'secret' and use the word 'surprise'

instead for all those occasions where we are going to surprise someone with something good. This is because abusers often tell children, "This is our secret" to prevent them from telling about what has happened. We need to teach children that 'bad secrets' should always be told especially if we or someone else is going to be hurt by a secret being kept. This guideline makes it so much easier for a child to report bullying in class, for example.

## **We have a loving circle of friends who would help us if we needed it.**

Children need to know that there are people around them who love them, whom they could turn to for help. This is reassuring anyway for children but it is part of the strategy for protective behaviours because often children have to go to many people to try to get help when abuse is happening, because people in the immediate family circle can be in denial that a family member or friend is abusing the child. A beautiful way to affirm who they can turn to is, at special times like birthdays, to light candles for each of the people in the child's 'circle of love.'

## **We can say NO and YES strongly when we mean it.**

Children need to be able to be firm in being able to say no and we can get them to practice this by saying yes and no firmly, like they mean it. Do you want an icecream? Yes... what? Say it like a lion! YESSS! Do you really mean that? YESSSS!!! Shall I tickle your toes? NOOOOO!

## **We can be persistent to get what we need.**

Another rule in protective behaviours is to teach children to persist in finding an adult who will listen to them when there is trouble.

Adults do not always want to hear about abuse which they do not want to admit is happening. Teach children to be persistent with you too. "I did not hear you ask for a banana! Did you get my attention? Did I look you in the eye? Did I hear what you said? Let's try that again..." "Mummy please listen to me..."

**We do not like bad tricks, bribes or blackmail in our house.**

This rule is because abusers often use tricks, bribery and blackmail to get children to cooperate with them. Try not to ever use

emotional blackmail or bribes yourself. Try to make it OK to get a reward for doing something good but not OK to take a bribe for doing something bad. A fine line of difference.

So these guidelines are designed to warn off potential abusers as well as to set the scene for children keeping themselves safe, making a foundation for more detailed training in protective behaviours when they get older and can understand that there are people in the world who try to do bad things to children sometimes.

### *Older children's sexual development in brief*

From seven years onwards, with a new awareness of adult responses and, at times, natural shyness, much of the sexual behaviour goes underground and out of adult sight. Dirty jokes continue to do the rounds. Sensuous children, girls particularly, are still at risk in tickling, wrangling games, where touch easily becomes sexual touch, especially with older children (whose sex hormones may be driving new curiosities).

By the time the physiological changes of puberty are established, new consciousness of breasts (Tens and Elevens) and genitals again becomes obsessive (often for older Elevens and Twelves). Children may again explore themselves and each other. There is an increase

in mutual sexual exploration between same sex children but they have the canniness now not to do it around adults. Restatement of personal boundaries and permission and respect for themselves and others are needed here. It should be emphasised again that children have a right to be safe and to tell adults if they do not feel safe. If there is a big age difference between the children in this new age of exploration it is of more concern.

However after seven, children should now be fully informed about the risk of sexual abuse, how to keep themselves safe, and how to keep others safe. More on protecting older children can be found in Freda Briggs' work mentioned in the introduction.

### *Conclusion*

Sexual abuse of children is widespread in our community and is complex in its origins. It is particularly difficult to deal with because there is a continuum of abuse which can start with with the innocent developmental curiosity and

explorations of young children themselves. Clear boundaries need to be given to children so that their developmental behaviours do not lead to being vulnerable to the manipulative, sexually abusive behaviours of others. Adults

need to be much clearer and articulate providing healthy personal boundaries for ourselves and our children.

Protective behaviours can be taught from very early in childhood with a very basic rule about personal touch. Specifically we teach them about personal boundaries and the privacy of the mouth, breasts, genitals and anus. So we have the comprehensive family rule from babyhood on, expressed repeatedly in appropriate ways according to the age, as the opportunities arise: *'Our private parts (mouth, breast, anus, genitals) are our own and other people don't touch them (except Mummy or Daddy or doctor in special circumstances, like keeping them clean and healthy and then only with respect and permission.) We also do not touch other people's private parts.'*

It should also be said again that the foundation for protecting children against sexual abuse lies in developing a robust sense of self, as well as these clear personal boundaries and a strong belief in one's right to safety and respect from others for the self and those boundaries—in essence, good self esteem. Part of such development, is also having an equal respect for others. The development of all this is also essential for the development of a healthy

sexuality. See *Building self esteem* for reminders on what is important here.

We can also work with the Family Safety Guidelines to keep our children safe. Understanding the basis of these guidelines increases our awareness of where the dangers to children lie in regard to sexual abuse and provides strategies to deal preventively with these. As a basis for all this, it is helpful to understand the sexual interests of children throughout their development so that we can choose appropriate times to educate them about all these things.

Finally, we can see that the clearer we are about inappropriate sexual touch and fondling, and inadvertent adult sexual arousal, the fewer places for confusion and denial there will be. We will then be able to pre-emptively protect our children, as well as confront a person (including ourselves) to stop any inappropriate touch. If inappropriate touch does occur we will also be better able to respond calmly and sensibly to avoid aggravating the situation and be more likely to find appropriate strategies to bring healing to the situation. More understanding of all these issues helps to make sexual abuse more preventable.

## Further reading

Briggs, Freda & McVeity, Michael *Teaching children to protect themselves* (Allen and Unwin 2000)

## Other articles of interest on the website

*Building self esteem*