



Responding to harmful sexual behaviour in young children

A guide for early years and primary school staff

1. Understanding the behaviour

When young children display sexual behaviour that is outside the range of what is developmentally expected, it is more likely to be inappropriate or problematic than abusive. Young children may be 'acting out' abuse they have experienced themselves, or responding to other trauma or neglect. In some situations, they may use sexualised behaviour as an extension of bullying.

This does not mean the behaviour should be ignored. All sexual behaviour that is not considered developmentally typical requires a response, and the designated safeguarding lead/professional must always be informed.

Always consider: Could this child have been sexually abused themselves? If you have concerns, make a referral to children's social care.

2. Responding in the moment

Use this four-step approach:

1. **Stop the behaviour.** Change the situation. Separate the children, and draw the child's attention to something else or tell them to stop what they are doing. Stay calm.
2. **Define the behaviour.** Be clear and specific about what the child is doing that is not appropriate. Describe what you have seen. The more specific you are, the better the opportunity for the child to understand and change their behaviour.
3. **State the rules.** Tell the child how you expect them to behave, or repeat rules you have previously explained. "The rule is that we respect each other's privacy. That includes not touching each other on private parts of the body." Be direct, but do not lecture.
4. **Redirect and reinforce.** Guide the child towards more appropriate behaviour. Distract them with another activity if needed. End the encounter on a positive note and praise the child when they behave appropriately.

3. What to do next

Inform the designated safeguarding lead/professional about what you have observed or been told.

Record what happened using the child's own words and your observations. Do not interpret or add your own conclusions.

Speak to the child's parents calmly and factually. Use agreed terminology (such as "penis" or "vagina") and describe what was observed, without being judgemental. Give them time to absorb the information.

Consider the context. Where and when did the behaviour happen? What might have triggered it? Use this to inform any supervision or safety measures.

For more detailed advice, see our practice resources:

- [*Signs and indicators: A template for identifying and recording concerns of child sexual abuse*](#)
- [*Safety planning in education: A guide for professionals supporting children following incidents of harmful sexual behaviour*](#)