

Is this sexual behavior normal?

The answer depends on context. You can better evaluate and respond to a child's sexual behaviors by following the A-B-C-D of context: affect, behavior, control and development.

We cannot, as a rule, categorize specific sexual behaviors as healthy, problematic or abusive. For instance, masturbation, when done occasionally in private, is an expected behavior. However, when a child is constantly masturbating in front of others, or compulsively masturbating to the point where it hurts, we become concerned that something is wrong. When we are trying to make sense of a child's sexual behaviors, pay attention to the A-B-C-D of the context in which the behavior occurs.

Stay calm and avoid overreacting.

Most sexual behaviors in children are within the normal/expected range.

Don't ignore the behavior.

Assess the situation.

Look at the A-B-C-D of context.

A=Affect (Emotion)

Is this spontaneous, lighthearted play?

Does the child respond with strong feelings of guilt, aggression, fear, or anxiety?

Does the child appear numb or dissociate in relation to the sexual activity?

B=Behavior

Has this behavior occurred before? In the same or different way? How often and in what contexts?

What other patterns of behavior (sexual or non-sexual) have you noticed?

C=Control

Is the interaction a mutually understood and wanted activity among peers?

Is there a power imbalance between the children?

Does everyone involved understand what is happening, want to be there and feel free to leave or say no? Is any form of pressure, manipulation, coercion or force being used?

D=Development

Does the behavior match the child's age and developmental level?

Do we expect most children in this culture/community to act this way?

Is the child's sexual development in balance with the rest of his/her development?

Respond appropriately.

Label the behavior. "I see/saw you...", "I heard you...", or "Your friend told me..."

Label feelings. "That made me feel...", "That made your friend feel...", "Susie said she feels..."

Ask open-ended questions if needed.

Promote accountability and be specific. "Stop pulling your friend's pants down." "When you and your friend are playing together, I will be close by and the door will be open." "Remember our rule; we treat our friends with care and respect."

ADAPTED FROM:

Boston Area Rape Crisis Center from Prevent Child Abuse Vermont