

## **Part 2: Sharing Developmental, Age-Appropriate Information With Children**

**Editor's note:** *This is part 2 of a 2-part series regarding age-appropriate curiosity and harmful sexual behavior and abuse in children. Part 1 of the series addressed age and developmentally appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviors in children that adults employed or ministering within child-serving environments should know. Conversely, this part 2 article will focus on providing additional information as well as conversation-starters, and points to share directly and frequently with children in an age-appropriate manner. To review the specific behaviors, please refer to Part 1 of this article, "Differentiating age-appropriate curiosity from harmful sexual behavior and abuse in elementary aged children."*

### **Introduction**

This article addresses proactive and reactive conversation points to discuss with children, to help them have a healthy understanding of their bodies and appropriate boundaries in relationships with others. Before having these conversations, it would be helpful for the adult to review behaviors children exhibit that are natural and developmentally appropriate sexual curiosity, versus problematic sexual behaviors that could cause harm-and then know how to address the behaviors in a way that is helpful to all. These conversation points are intended to build upon that foundation of knowledge.

As a quick summary of what was addressed in the initial article of this series<sup>1</sup>, when adults observe problematic or harmful sexual behaviors from children, at the very least, adults should take the opportunity to have a conversation with the child and share valuable developmentally and age-appropriate information as well as personal safety information.<sup>2</sup>

Keep in mind, if any harmful or problematic sexual behaviors (PSB) are observed by an employee or volunteer, they should be documented and communicated to the parents of the children involved, as well as one's supervisor. Please note, observing problematic sexual behaviors is different from having suspicions of sexual abuse, which must be communicated to law enforcement or child protective services.<sup>3</sup>

### **We must be aware of conversation tools to help us be reactive and proactive**

Ideally, we should plan consistent and frequent timeframes by which to communicate with children about safety measures, particularly when it comes to their bodies. Below are examples appropriate topics to discuss with children, separated into items to alert them to what can be confusing changes to their bodies, along with safety items to discuss with them. It is most helpful for children to be aware of these items in advance of potential grooming or attempts at abuse, because it helps them to be more resistant to abuse.

Further, there may come a time when employees and volunteers may identify issues related to problematic sexual behaviors or inappropriate behavior surrounding sex, and will need to communicate some of the information below to a child within the ministry or program from a safety perspective-in more of a reactive manner. For example, a kindergarten religious education teacher may need to remind students to keep their pants pulled up to cover their underwear / private parts. A teacher may be conducting a safe environment lesson and will communicate to the students about boundaries and safe vs. unsafe interactions. A staff member may overhear children talking about looking at images of naked or partially naked people and may need to intervene. A school employee may observe children discussing sexual behaviors and may need to address the conversation. A volunteer may become aware that a child has asked a peer to engage in a specific sexual act and will need to address the situation immediately.

These are all examples that require communication directly to the youth and also to the parents-and potentially to the child protective services or law enforcement in the state if abuse is suspected. Additionally, when an adult is concerned about the behaviors that children are exhibiting, it may also be helpful to refer the child to therapy services.

Keep in mind that some of the information below may be geared toward conversations for parents or guardians to have with the children in their care, though all adults in child-serving institutions should have a general idea of discussion points, since we never know when we may be called upon by children to be their trusted, safe adult.

### **DEVELOPMENTAL, AGE-APPROPRIATE INFORMATION AND SAFETY INFORMATION TO SHARE DIRECTLY WITH CHILDREN**<sup>4,5</sup>

*When considering the wellbeing of children, we need to plan for consistent conversations with them about their bodies and healthy boundaries in relationships-and these conversations should begin very early in the child's life, albeit in age-appropriate ways. What follows are specific talking points to address with children from both developmental perspectives, and also from a safety perspective.*

#### **Preschool children (less than 4 years):**

Developmental information. Explain the following to children in language they can understand:

- Boys and girls are different.
- Accurate names for body parts of boys and girls.
- Babies come from mommies.
- Rules about personal boundaries (for example, keeping private parts covered, not touching other children's private parts).
- Give simple answers to all questions about the body and bodily functions.

Safety information. Explain the following to children:

- The difference between "okay" touches (which are comforting, pleasant, and welcome) and "not okay" touches (which are intrusive, uncomfortable, unwanted, or painful).
- Your body belongs to you.
- Everyone has the right to say "no" to being touched, even by adults.
- No one-child or adult-has the right to touch your private parts *except in very specific circumstances, such as a doctor or another safe adult, specifically for the purpose of keeping the child clean or healthy. When doctors must inspect a child's private parts, it should always be in the presence of a safe adult.*
- It's okay to say "no" when other children or grownups ask you to do things that are wrong, such as touching private parts, or keeping secrets from mommy or daddy. If you feel confused about whether or not something is wrong, you can ask mommy or daddy, or even a teacher or other safe adult.
- It is never okay to keep secrets from mommy and daddy. There is a difference between a "surprise"-which is something that will be revealed sometime soon, like a present or party-and an unsafe "secret," which is something you're never supposed to tell.
- There are several people kids can go to if a child or adult does "not okay" things to you, or asks you to do "not okay" things to them. For example, you can go to mom or dad, an aunt or uncle, or a teacher.

## **Young children (approximately 4-6 years):**

Developmental information. Explain the following to children in language they can understand:

- Boys' and girls' bodies change when they get older.
- How babies grow in their mothers' wombs and about the birth process (simple explanations suffice).
- Rules about personal boundaries (such as, keeping private parts covered, not touching other children's private parts, not asking to see other children's private parts).
- Simple answers to all questions about the body and bodily functions
- Touching your own private parts is something that should not be done in public

Safety information. Explain the following to children:

- Sexual abuse is when someone touches your private parts or asks you to touch their private parts.
- It can be sexual abuse even if it is by someone you know, like or trust.
- People you know should never make you feel uncomfortable, and should respect you when you say "no" or "stop" when it comes to your boundaries.
- Sexual abuse, or any kind of abuse, is NEVER the child's fault.
- If a stranger tries to get you to go with him or her, try to run from the person and tell a parent, teacher, neighbor, police officer, or other trusted adult.
- If someone you know threatens you and says that you'll get in trouble for telling about abuse, that is very unsafe, and you should tell a safe person anyway.
- There are a lot of adults you can tell to get help if people do "not okay" things to you, or ask you to do "not okay" things to them, such as a teacher, an adult family member, or mom or dad.

## **School-aged children (approximately 7-12 years):**

Developmental information. Explain the following to children: *(Please note some of these are specific to discussion from parents, though it helps all adults to know what should be discussed within these age ranges.)*

- What to expect with the changes of puberty and how to cope (including menstruation and sexual dreams).
- Basics of reproduction, pregnancy, and childbirth.
- Risks of sexual activity (pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases), and Catholic social teaching regarding sexuality and abstinence.

Safety information. Explain the following to children:

- Sexual abuse and exploitation may or may not involve touch; it can also involve non-contact abuse or abuse over the internet or technology.
- How to maintain safety and personal boundaries when chatting or meeting people online or through technology.
- How to recognize and avoid risky social situations.
- Sexual abuse is never the child's fault.
- It's never too late to get help.

- Dating rules and expectations, and specific examples of healthy relationships vs. exploitative or manipulative ones.
- Facts about abuse, such as how sexual abuse can happen even in relationships with people who say they love you.
- What to do if anyone (an adult or a peer) makes them feel scared, uncomfortable or unsafe (that they can say "No!," they can try to get away, and they can tell a safe adult as soon as possible)

As the child enters puberty, physiological and psychological changes occur. Adolescent development increasingly becomes more focused on autonomy and assuming adult roles, the youth ideally takes on more responsibility for one's behavior, and sexual interests tend towards relationship building with a partner and dating. For more information, there are excellent resources available for parents and professionals working with youth from the *Society for Adolescent Medicine* and the *Center's for Disease Control and Prevention*.

### **Conclusion:**

As adults, it is helpful to be aware of how to discuss age-appropriate information with children. Even if much of this information may be communicated by the parents, safe adults may also, at times, need to have a discussion with children regarding appropriate behaviors. In fact, some of these children may come to you to talk about the abuse that happened to them, or that is happening, and your knowledge will help you with the conversation. Your dedication to differentiating appropriate and safe behaviors, and then being willing to communicate about them, will not only help to protect children, but will also be an essential step in helping to get children the help they need when trouble looms.

### References

- 1 Part 1: Differentiating age-appropriate curiosity from harmful sexual behavior and abuse in elementary aged children
- 2 [NSPCC Learning. Understanding sexualized behaviour in children. (20 June 2024) <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/harmful-sexual-behaviour/understanding>]
- 3 NSPCC Learning. (25 Mar 2024) How to manage incidents of problematic or harmful sexual behaviour. <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/harmful-sexual-behaviour/managing-incidents>
- 4 [American Academy of Pediatrics. (2023) Sexual Behaviors in Young Children: What's normal, What's Not? Healthychildren.org. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/preschool/Pages/Sexual-Behaviors-Young-Children.aspx>]
- 5 [National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). (2009). Caring for Kids: What Parents Need to Know about Sexual Abuse. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/sexual-development-and-behavior-children-information-parents-and-caregivers>
- 6 <https://www.cdc.gov/parenting-teens/about/index.html>
- 7 <https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/dating-matters-toolkit/>

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