

My Child is Experiencing Problematic Sexual Behavior: What is it and what do I do?

As a parent or caregiver, your involvement in your child's life is the key to his or her success. Your participation in his or her daily life—along with any treatment for problematic sexual behavior (PSB) — shapes his or her behaviors and helps to reduce or eliminate PSB.

Talking with your child about sex, sexual behaviors, and sexual development can feel uncomfortable. Before addressing PSB, learn about the range of sexual behaviors that are typical for children and adolescents. Children's and adolescents natural curiosity about sexual behavior can provide an easy starting place.

Keep conversations about these topics developmentally appropriate, so use accurate and appropriate names and functions of all sex or body parts (e.g., penis, vagina, buttocks, anus). Also, explain the social expectations and rules about behavior, privacy, and respect for his or her own bodies and others' bodies.

1 How should I as a parent or caregiver respond to PSB?

PSB usually takes place when a child feels anxious or angry, is reacting to a traumatic experience, is overly curious after seeing sexual materials, is seeking attention, is trying to imitate others, or is merely trying to calm him or herself.

2 What should I do if I witness my child engaging in PSB while alone?

- Calm yourself. Do not have this conversation while angry.
- Speak quietly and interrupt (stop) the behavior if still in progress.
- Allow your child to cover up to avoid further embarrassment.
- Feel free to delay your talk until you have time to figure out what you feel and want to say!
- When ready, first find out what happened by asking open-ended questions:
 - What were you doing?*
 - How did you get the idea to do this?*
 - How did you feel about doing it?*
- Don't ask "why" as your child may not understand why she or he engaged in the behavior.
- Give time for your child to answer your questions and listen carefully to the answers.
- Repeat or ask your child "Did you say . . ." to clarify what you thought she or he said.



- Give basic safety information (or follow up the next day with a talk) about “body boundaries,” “okay” vs “not okay” touches or “in private” vs “public” behavior.
- When you do talk to your child, explain in terms of “family rules” with clear expectations.
- Don’t give scary or untrue information.
- Keep this conversation short. End by warmly thanking your child for talking with you.

3 What should I do if I witness my child engaging in PSB while with one or more friends?

- Calm yourself. Do not have this conversation while angry.
- Speak quietly and interrupt (stop) the behavior if it is still in progress.
- Allow your child and any others involved to cover up to avoid further embarrassment.
- Feel free to delay your talk until you have time to figure out what you feel and want to say!
- Consider whether you want to speak to your child alone after the other child or children have left..
- Think, “How would I want another family to handle this if my child were at their house?”
- Consider separating the children or change the sleeping arrangements if the behaviors occur at a sleepover and talk with the other parents or caregivers before speaking with the children. Tell the child’s or children’s parents or caregivers what you expect to say to the children.
- Ask them if there is anything they would like you to say.
- When you do talk to your child, explain in terms of “family rules” with clear expectations (i.e., “If you and Jenny break the rule, Jenny will have to go home early.”).
- Gently gather information about friendships and relationships with others.

4 What should I do if my child is exhibiting PSB?

- Make sure your child is supervised around other children until the problem has been addressed.
- Find out as much as possible about the behavior: what the behavior is, how often does it happen, and in what situations.
- Make sure your child knows exactly what behavior is allowed and what is not.
- Have clear and consistent consequences for misbehavior.
- Teach children how to say no to “not okay” touches or how to tell a friend about the family rule.
- Praise positive behavior.
- Create a family environment that does not expose children to sexual behaviors, conversations, or materials (i.e., videos, TV, video games).
- Set clear expectations about privacy.

One of the most stressful situations you can face as a parent or caregiver is finding out that your child has acted out in a sexual way. If your child has exhibited PSB, seek professional support. As you move forward in getting help for your child, keep in mind that children with PSB are—first and foremost—children. Your child may have made a poor decision, but he or she can learn to make good decisions moving forward.

