



Youth with Problematic Sexual Behavior

Children with problematic sexual behavior are first and foremost children. Misinformation often leads the public, and even professionals, to negatively label these children, offering little hope for change. This technical assistance bulletin will distinguish common sexual behavior from behavior that is problematic, provide information on problematic sexual behavior in children, and explain why this topic is important to the field of victim services.

Sexual development in children

Sexual development is a part of childhood, and it begins at birth like all parts of development. Parents and caregivers are often familiar with areas of child development like motor development, language development, and social-emotional development. Although adults often become concerned when children show sexual behaviors, many of these behaviors are a natural part of sexual development.

Problematic sexual behavior

Sometimes sexual behaviors in children are more than a result of harmless curiosity and become harmful to the youth and to other children. Problematic sexual behaviors are a set of behaviors that are developmentally inappropriate, potentially harmful to self or others, and are illegal (*The National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth, n.d.*).

Sexual behaviors in children can range from common to problematic:

Common Sexual Behavior in Children	↔	Problematic Sexual Behavior in Children
Occurs between children of the same general age and physical size		Involves children of widely different ages or abilities
Spontaneous and unplanned		Involves threats, force, or aggression
Infrequent		High frequency
Voluntary (the children agreed to the behavior, none of the involved children seem uncomfortable or upset)		Strong emotional reactions (emotional distress, fear, anger, anxiety)
Easily redirected when parents tell children to stop and explain privacy rules		Does not respond to correction

While there is no profile or clear pattern of demographic, psychological, or social factors, risk factors for youth with problematic sexual behavior can be identified. The following indicators can be identified on an individual, family, or community level: (*The National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth, n.d.*).

- Child vulnerabilities: attention deficit disorder, learning delays, reactions to traumatic events or other factors that hinder a youth's ability to control impulses and respect other's boundaries.
- Modeling of sexuality: inadequate information about bodies and sexuality, unhealthy boundaries or few rules about privacy in the home, exposure to adult sexual activity or nudity (including media exposure), or other factors that lead to a sexualized environment.
- Modeling of coercion: exposure to family or community violence, physical abuse, bullying or other factors that contribute to an environment that models coercion for youth.
- Family adversity: parental depression, substance use, exposure to abuse, or other factors that hinder a family's ability to provide close supervision

We have historically referred to youth with problematic sexual behavior as child offenders and likewise have intervened with offender treatment. Youth with problematic sexual behavior typically have distinctly different characteristics than adults who sexually abuse children. The sexual behaviors of youth usually take place when the young person feels anxious or angry, is reacting to a traumatic experience, is overly curious after seeing sexual materials, is trying to imitate others, or is trying to calm themselves (*Hagenbaugh & Osborn, 2017*).

Professionals should support youth with problematic sexual behavior but this does not excuse them from mandated reporting responsibilities.

Child-first language

One of the most important things you can do as a professional is to avoid using shame-based language and labels; not to imply that these behaviors are not serious in nature, but that they are in fact behaviors and do not fully define the child. This shame, in part, prevents parents from seeking help for themselves and their children, only leads to further risk.

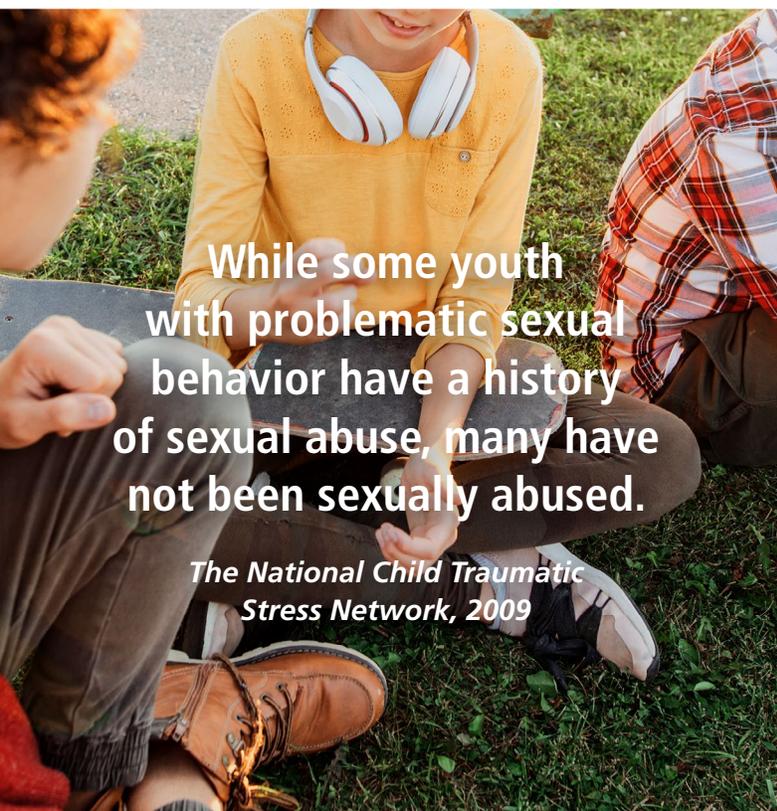
The use of person-first language is a core value in the sexual assault movement as we recognize the strengths of each person and choose not to define individuals solely by their behaviors. Using child-first language also helps others to accurately identify those youth at risk (i.e. a child with behavior problems conjures up a very different image than a child offender), normalize the problem as a behavior, and offer hope to parents and families.

Terms to use:

- Youth with problematic sexual behavior
- Child with sexual behavior problems
- Child with behavior problems

Why is this topic important to victim services?

Problematic sexual behavior occurs most often with other children known by the youth, with



Most children with problematic sexual behavior respond well to increased supervision and safety and caregiver participation in evidence-based treatment.

National Children's Alliance, n.d.

a quarter of victims being family members (*The National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth, n.d.*). Because this behavior occurs within social networks, services are needed not only for the youth, but the children impacted and the families involved. Your role as a professional in the field of victim services is a key part of the comprehensive approach to working with these families.

Ultimately we all want to prevent the sexual abuse of children. Community collaboration and implementation of evidence-based services can lead to decreased risk and increased safety for everyone. Outcomes include increased pro-social behaviors in youth, decreased parent and family stress, improved safety and well-being for the child and family, and sustainable and safe reunification of family members (*The National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth, n.d.*). These positive outcomes benefit not only the youth with problematic sexual behavior but the families and children impacted as well.

Field Reviewers

We thank our field reviewers for their expertise and contributions:

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Resources

- ChildLine
1-800-932-0313
- Keep Kids Safe
<http://www.keepkidssafe.pa.gov/>
- The National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth www.ncsby.org
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
www.nctsn.org

References

Hagenbaugh, K., & Osborn, J. (2017, July). What to do with problematic sexual behavior in children and youth. Presentation at the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape Statewide Conference, Camp Hill, PA.

National Children's Alliance. (n.d.). What we can do: Understanding children and youth with problematic sexual behaviors. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/sites/default/files/downloads/2017-PSB-Fact-Sheet-Overview-3.pdf>

The National Center for the Sexual Behavior of Youth. (n.d.). Collaborative, community based, evidence based services for problematic sexual behavior in children and youth. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/ncsby>

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2009). Understanding and coping with sexual behavior problems in children. Retrieved from <http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/sexualbehaviorproblems.pdf>



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