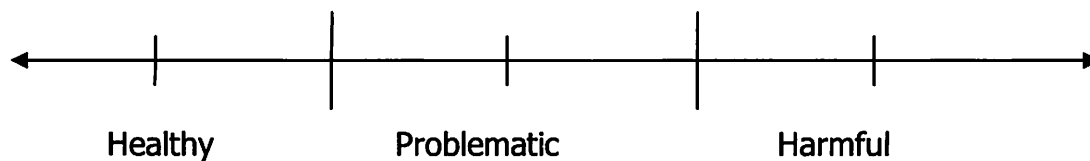


Continuum of Sexual Behaviours from Healthy to Harmful

Not all sexual behaviours displayed by children /adolescents are healthy; some are harmful, and some fall within a mid range (problematic), which means that they clearly have aspects that are not within the healthy range, but are not the most worrying behaviours. The term problematic is used to indicate that the behaviour is a problem for someone, whether that is for the child/adolescent themselves, such as compulsive masturbation, or for someone else, for example, an adult who feels uncomfortable with the invasion of their personal space by a child/adolescent with little sense of boundaries.

The continuum would look like this:



Characteristics of Healthy Sexual Behaviours

The key features in healthy sexual behaviours for children/adolescents are that the behaviours are:

- Mutual
- Consensual, that participants feel that they have a choice whether or not to engage in the behaviour
- Exploratory - age appropriate behaviour
- No intent to cause harm
- Fun, humorous
- No power differentials between the participants

For younger children aged 0-4, we can add periods of disinhibition when they like to shed their clothing. They usually get socialised out of this type of behaviour and it would only become a concern if they were still doing it in the 5 – 7 year old stage.

Characteristics of Problematic Sexual Behaviours

The characteristics of problematic sexual behaviours are:

- Displaying sexual behaviours that are not age appropriate. For example, a younger child using sexual swear words, or not seeming to have clear boundaries re personal space, therefore making others feel uncomfortable
- Some one-off incidents of low key behaviours such as touching over clothing

- Incidents where there seems to be peer pressure to engage in the behaviour for example, touching someone's breast, exposure of bottom
- Behaviours are spontaneous, rather than planned
- They may be self directed, such as masturbation
- There are other balancing factors for example, lack of intent to cause harm, or the level of understanding of the child/adolescent about the behaviours in which they are engaging; or there is acceptance of responsibility for the behaviour and some remorse shown
- The child/adolescent targeted may be irritated or uncomfortable but they are not scared, and they feel free to tell someone
- Other factors in their background such as parents are concerned about the behaviour and interested in working with the child/adolescent to change

Characteristics of Harmful Sexual Behaviours

The characteristics of harmful sexual behaviours are:

- Sexual behaviours that are not age appropriate
- Elements of planning, secrecy, force or coercion
- Power differentials between the children/adolescents involved such as, age, size, status, strength
- The response of the children/adolescents targeted, for example negative feelings like fear, anxiety, discomfort etc
- Negative feelings such as fear, anger, aggression etc expressed by the child/adolescent doing the behaviour
- The child/adolescent does not take responsibility for their behaviour and blames others or feels a strong sense of grievance
- Incidents are frequent or increasing in frequency and the child/adolescent's focus on them is disproportionate to other aspects of their life
- They are not easily distracted from the behaviour, and the behaviour appears compulsive and is persistent despite intervention

There are often other difficult behaviours such as conduct disorders, problems with anger management, anxiety, clingy, aggression, disruption, poor peer relationships