

Intervention Tips for Problematic Sexual Behavior

For most people, dealing with problematic sexual behaviors in children is unfamiliar territory, and is often uncomfortable. Some behaviors may be particularly disturbing for parents such as masturbation.

Remember: separate the child from the behavior.

Children who have been sexually abused often repeat what has happened to them. It does not mean they are bad kids: it means their behavior is inappropriate.

Use words that describe behavior such as “inappropriate”, “not okay,” or “against the rules” instead words that judge the person such as “bad” or “misbehaving” or “nasty.” Children who sexually act out may not understand what they are doing is wrong or may have difficulty controlling themselves.

Think first of teaching, not punishing.

Stay calm when you react to a child’s behavior. Be firm, set limits and help a child feel your support. The child will take his cue from you.

Patricia Ryan, Ph.D., has developed a simple technique for parents to use when confronting a child’s sexually acting behavior. It has four simple parts.

1. Stop The Behavior.

- Don’t address a behavior while the child is still doing it.
- Change the situation, stop, distract, or change the environment.
- Push the child’s hand away.
- Separate the children, draw attention toward something else, say “Stop what you are doing!” or “Pull up your pants,” or “Get dressed.”

2. Define The Behavior.

- Be clear what behavior the child is doing that is inappropriate.
- Describe what you see to the child. The more specific and clear you can be with the child about what he is doing is wrong, the better opportunity the child has to change or relearn his behavior.
- If you react with general anger, the child may interpret the anger as “I’m bad” instead of “What I’m doing is wrong.”
- Not: “Stop that!” Or “Don’t do that!” Or “That’s bad!”
- Try:
 - “You are poking Billy’s private parts and that’s not okay.”
 - “You are being sexual with the dog and we already talked about how it is not okay.”
- You may not be used to this kind of language. It may help to think about what the child is doing that is not okay, then describe the behavior it so the child knows exactly what you want to discuss.

3. State The House Rules.

- Repeat the appropriate house rule or expectation that applies to the situation.
- Start with something like, “In this house...”
- Or “The rule is... (you do not touch Billy’s private parts)” or “We expect everyone in our family to (pet the dog, and no one is to be sexual with him)...”
- Be direct but don’t lecture.

4. Enforce The Consequence Or Redirect The Child.

- For younger children you can redirect or distract the child to more appropriate behavior.
- End the encounter on a positive note and praise the child when he acts in the way you suggest.
- If the child is older and this behavior is repetitive, you may wish to add a non-punitive consequence.
- Don’t hurt or humiliate a child, but if a house rule is broken, it may be helpful to include a consequence or time out, an extra chore or writing sentences.